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**All the World's a Soundstage:
Investigating Metacinema**

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Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2016

Dedication

To the loved ones around me who have put up with my incessant references to and endless discussion of various films, no matter how (un)solicited; to Johnson and Fallick for always being willing to debate; to the more recent company who encouraged stupidity as well as hard work; to my parents and family, for all their continued and immeasurable support.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr. Keating for encouraging and enriching my academic study of film. Thank you to all the teachers from my earlier youth who instilled in me a love of stories and storytelling (Richardson, Stark, Prudhomme, Davidson, Holmes, Ms. Paula). Thank you to the Trinity University theatre faculty for furthering that love, and especially to Dr. Stacey Connelly for teaching me how to write. Thank you to Dr. Ramírez Berg and Dr. Schatz, who have done so much to shape the crude thoughts of this thesis into something passable. And thank you to Mr. Self, for all the commiseration.

Abstract

All the World's a Soundstage: Investigating Metacinema

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The University of Texas at Austin, May 2016

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This thesis begins work towards a complete understanding of narrative metacinema by categorizing films that qualify as metacinema and analyzing some sample films. The categories are parody, films about stories or storytelling, and films with heavy performative and dreaming elements. The discussion revolves around how each of these categories produces films that are self-aware, as well as how the tension between fiction and truth is central to all of metacinema in different ways.

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Chapter One: Introduction

The phrase “That is so meta” and its variants are ubiquitous in popular culture. Whether it is a t-shirt with a picture of a t-shirt that reads “This Shirt Is So Meta” or an off-handed comment about a *Community* joke, “meta” is now a part of our lexicon. In recent years, the idea of metatextualism has appeared more and more in critical and common thought when considering film. In popular usage, saying that something is “so meta” is calling attention to the fact that “everything, it seems, can instantly become self-referential, self-conscious, and self-parodying” (Zimmer). This is true, but barely scratches the surface of the complexities of “meta-ness.”

This common perspective restricts the meta-function to being seen as a simple mirror held up to any object for seldom more than a laugh. Meta techniques as applied to film are far more powerful and ambitious, creating metacinematic works in search of various forms of truth, such as *Through the Olive Trees* (Kiarostami 1994) or *Peeping Tom* (Powell 1960). By holding up a mirror to a work, filmmakers call attention to the constructed nature of film, which is, in its own right, an act of truth. By exposing this constructed nature of fiction films, a film can make grander claims than before about truth itself and its relationship to fiction. Metatextualism in the movies widens the scope of critical thought through the presentation, delivery, and content of a work that considers those exact elements throughout the creative process and includes this awareness in the final product.

For such a widely employed technique and critical tool, metacinema is too misunderstood and under-discussed. There has been no work in the field truly dedicated to forming a cohesive understanding metacinema. As this introduction will show, the dearth of academic study concerning metacinema is disheartening and the topic is in great need of earnest efforts – such as this thesis – to make sense of it. I dedicate the following pages to analyzing certain choice films in depth that are metacinematic in unique ways, including but not limited to: *Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story* (Kasdan 2007), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (Hill 1969), *The Truman Show* (Weir 1998), *Persona* (Bergman 1966), *Anna Karenina* (Wright 2012), and *Solaris* (Tarkovsky 1972). As this diverse sampling indicates, metacinema is capable of assuming many different forms. This thesis will illuminate those forms while highlighting the common strand that connects all of metacinema: a complex treatment of the tension between fiction and reality that is inherent in all self-aware art.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Etymology of Meta

Before we continue to investigate metacinema and its varied forms, it is important to understand the different meanings and applications created by the different words to which the prefix “meta” is often attached. The New Oxford American Dictionary recognizes “meta” as a word all on its own, citing a 1980s origin that applies specifically to “a creative work” referring “to itself or to the conventions of its genre.” As we shall see, even this definition falls short of the far-reaching capabilities of truly meta work.

Perhaps the most useful definition for film of the prefix “meta” is the third of five (where two are chemical): “denoting something of a higher or second-order kind.” This is a vague, open-ended definition, as is probably most appropriate for a concept as flexible as meta-what-have-you. It should be noted that the term “metafilm” will henceforth be avoided to prevent confusion due to the fact that metafilm is a term frequently used in electromagnetics. Other terms – metatextual, metafictional, and metacinematic – can essentially be used interchangeably, although the last of those terms obviously applies exclusively to meta tendencies in film. For my thesis, I will be using “metacinema” more frequently for that reason, although “metatextual” and “metafictional” will prove helpful when discussing broader strategies.

This application of the prefix “meta-” automatically elevates whatever word it precedes, be it text, fiction, cinema, film, or the derivatives thereof. This elevation of terms is somewhat literal. Another New Oxford American definition of “meta-” includes the word “beyond” which – in conjunction with the previously listed definition – brings home this notion of a grander perspective. Simply put, anything considered meta is something that projects an extreme self-consciousness of the work at hand.

This notion of artistic self-awareness was in practice long before it was a serious topic of study, as is often the case. In both of their extensive books on metafiction, Patricia Waugh and Inger Christensen point to William H. Gass’ 1970 essay “Philosophy and the Form of Fiction” as containing the first use of “metafiction” (Waugh 2; Christensen 9). Waugh, however, acknowledges an earlier forebear in the term “metatheatre.” The coiner of this term is Lionel Abel who introduced this word in a 1963

text called *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form*. Abel's working concept of metatheatricality is perhaps most closely related to the metacinematic ideas that this thesis will focus on for obvious reasons concerning the performative and presentational similarities inherently shared by film and the theatre. This landmark work detailed the core notions of all things meta, and it shares a special relationship with metacinema, as theatre and film are naturally similar. The other literature selections in the following sections corroborate and flesh out his ideas, while digging deeper to discover more nuanced views of metatextuality that frequently appear in metacinema.

Beginning with Metatheatre

Abel distills his definition of metatheatre to “two basic postulates: (1) the world is a stage and (2) life is a dream” (105). He borrows these axioms from two playwrights who he feels exemplify metatheatre: William Shakespeare and Pedro Calderón. Shakespeare's line comes from the text of his comedy *As You Like It* and Calderón's is the English title of what is perhaps his most famous play. As we will see, these authors have a great deal of influence on Abel's ideas. William Shakespeare's plays are commonly divided into three categories: history, comedy, and tragedy. The tragedies feature some of his most widely read and produced work: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet* to name a few. *Hamlet* is arguably the crown jewel of the tragedies, but Lionel Abel refuses to classify *Hamlet* as a true tragedy, arguing that the character of “Hamlet is an objective expression of Shakespeare's inability to make of his play a tragedy” (57). This is evidenced by many things: Hamlet's continued reluctance and seeming inability to act (45), the fact that “it is not tragic to kill one's uncle nor to have

been told to do so,” (41), and the four characters who resemble playwrights that give the piece a distinct metatheatrical quality (50). Abel does not label *Hamlet* as a new genre, claiming that there exists “no clear definition” for this play (52). He instead focuses on calling attention to the aforementioned metatheatricality of the piece.

Aside from the obvious play-within-a-play device that is used to “catch the conscience of the king” (II.ii.1680), Abel credits Hamlet as the main source of metatheatre within the play. Hamlet resembles a playwright in many ways, often feigning love and madness, – as Abel maintains that Hamlet is never *actually* mad (52) – directing the visiting players with noted confidence and bravado, as well as attempting to coax an honest confession out of Claudius by placing him in a specific situation as a dramatist would with his actor. All told, Abel finds more substance in the commentary that Shakespeare seems to be offering on the process of the creating dramatic stories than in the story itself. So much so that he claims Hamlet to be “the first stage figure with an acute awareness of what it means to be staged” (57-8). Again we encounter the idea of the extreme self-consciousness that turns an artwork’s gaze inward.

In Pedro Calderón de la Barca’s *Life Is a Dream* – a Spanish play first produced roughly thirty-three to thirty-seven years after *Hamlet* – all of existence is called into question. The main character is a prince who has been imprisoned since birth because of a prophecy stating that he would kill his parents. Having killed his mother during his birth, the prince’s father locks him away, only to have a change of heart twenty-one years later. In his transition to the outside he is drugged, revived, and introduced into society. Years of anger burst from him and he is drugged and imprisoned again as consequence

and told that his time outside was actually a dream. Bewildered and without a basis for understanding, the prince concludes that “life’s a dream, think what you will/And even all our dreams are dreams” (II.xix.2186-7). After a public uprising, the prince is released and denies himself the opportunity to kill his father, the king. The back-and-forth furthers his view of a dreamlike state of existence, and he concludes that – in addition to life being but a dream – “only virtue is real” (Abel 72).

Abel asserts that *Life Is a Dream* deals with the same subject (playwriting) as *Hamlet*, and he concludes that – by deciding early on to release his son on his twenty-first birthday rather than keep him locked away – the character of the king “substituted for the play intended by fate one of his own invention. The tragedy fails. [The king]’s play succeeds” (72). This view is dominant for Abel: he seems to understand metatheatre purely through the eyes of a playwright. He calls *Henry IV*’s Falstaff a dramatist (66), *The Tempest*’s Prospero a dramatist (69), and he ascribes four different playwriting styles to Claudius, the Ghost of King Hamlet, Polonius, and Prince Hamlet (50-1).

Through characters like these, metatheatrical plays create a fictional reality in which “the world is a projection of human consciousness,” essentially exposing the author to the audience (Abel 113). Abel’s metatheatre features nothing but an author imposing himself onto the work so much that not even the characters can ignore him or her. But Abel’s selections of metatheatre are unique because they feature an imposing author that is written into the story as a character. This is another example of blurred lines between fiction and reality, as the author himself seems to be straddling both worlds.

This abstract approach to metatheatre does not depend on the inclusion of a theatrical construct within the play and, as we will see, this gives licenses to the more abstractly metacinematic films featured in this thesis' fourth chapter. Additionally, this crossover is an essential element to any metatextual work and lies at the crux of understanding Abel's work and, consequently, metacinema. As Abel's postulates make clear, metatheatre – and therefore metacinema – must mix artifice and truth in a consistent and thorough manner in order to be considered such. Although Abel seems to be limited to a playwright's perspective, metacinema has taken the fiction/reality tension in many different directions. These possibilities will be explored in this thesis, applying Abel's strong foundation to the examination of metacinematic texts in order to understand how they function and what specifically makes them metacinematic.

Metafiction in Literature: Carrying the Torch

Although literature was seven years behind Abel in employing the “m” word, the concept is and was no less practiced and pervasive in the field. Christensen defines metafiction as “fiction whose primary concern is to express the novelist's vision of experience by exploring the process of its own making” (11). One novel often cited as an early and strong example in this tradition is *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* by Laurence Stern. *Shandy* is known for its tendency to highlight “the autonomy of the narrator, while the later techniques [draw] attention to the autonomy of the fictive structure itself” (Fletcher and Bradbury qtd. in Christensen 10). For example, the narrator discusses “his conception of the ideal reader,” demonstrating a consciousness of the fiction as it is constructed (Christensen 35). This consciousness results in an honest

acceptance of the “disparity between art and life” (Christensen 34). Sterne’s novel approaches a level that Abel apparently could not – or would not – imagine possible with theatre. Christensen argues that *Shandy* explores the meaning “of man’s earthly life...in terms of fictional creation,” using the metafictional devices handy to the narrator (36).

This is not to say that theatre cannot explore life’s great existential questions in the same way that literature can, because it most certainly can. One of the great metatextual writers of our time accomplished this in his play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Writing a story tangential to none other than *Hamlet*, Tom Stoppard commandeers two minor players from Shakespeare’s opus and turns them into title characters who muse on a great many subjects, chief of which is death. In much the same way that *Shandy* exposed the gap between reality and artifice, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* uses theatrical death to tap into the inability for death –above all other experiences – to be properly represented in the arts. In attempting to create a believable death on stage for a play-within-the-play, Guildenstern observes, “You scream and choke and sink to your knees, but it doesn’t bring death home to anyone – it doesn’t catch them unawares and start the whisper in their skulls that says – ‘One day you are going to die’” (83). Stoppard is using a discussion of theatre, its elements, and its intended effects to emphasize and investigate mortality.

This is an especially effective strategy for communicating theme in metatextualism. By acknowledging the shortcomings of fiction within the fiction itself, any argument for a theme or message becomes more potent by virtue of the bridge the fiction then builds to reality. In the above quote, Guildenstern is able to talk in specific

terms about a hypothetical audience, directly bringing the present one into the conversation.

As discussed above, Abel's views were somewhat limited to a writer's point of view. His postulates implied more room for metafictional strategies, yet Abel was hesitant to look beyond the literal role of a playwright in the diegetic world. But time and experimentation under the "meta-" prefix pushed metafiction to new heights, truly realizing the full potential of the belief that "life is a dream." Patricia Waugh – an early and thorough writer on metafiction – makes the case that metafictional tendencies have "offered extremely accurate models for understanding the contemporary experience of the world as a construction, an artifice" (9). Fictions that can be categorized as metatextual are more than just an amalgamation of self-referential winks and nudges to win over the audience with clever humor, as the surface-level conception discussed at the opening would insist. Metafiction has the realized potential to not only turn a mirror onto itself, but onto its audience as well, encouraging deep thought beyond the mechanics of storytelling, thereby openly questioning the role of art in life, or life in art.

The above quote from Waugh naturally invokes cinema, as film is the most imitative art form in respect to life with how it recreates sound, color, passage of time, and realistic locations in ways that the stage and page cannot fully realize. This is what makes cinema such a fertile breeding ground for cinema and an interesting topic of discussion: to have the most realistic of all fictions openly acknowledge its own artifice.

Evolution of the Literature

Since 1963, when Lionel Abel coined the term “metatheatre,” and took the first few steps with it, he opened a gate for a slightly accelerated study of the metatextual phenomenon. As is evident from my discussion of his work in relation to others above, there were some holes to fill in behind him. After all, the first pioneer cannot settle the entire frontier. Nevertheless, Abel laid out some very important tenets of metafiction. Aside from the above postulates, Abel listed a number of somewhat abstract qualities of metatheatre that can apply to all metafiction, a few of which are quite handy for our purposes, particularly the following: “Metatheatre assumes there is no world except that created by human striving, human imagination;” (113). Life is a dream, especially if we can create our own realities beyond its arbitrary parameters. Then it has no more authority over us than we give to it. The literary community most gallantly assumed the questions that Abel posed, which challenge the nature of truth.

Gass’ aforementioned “Philosophy and the Form of Fiction” appeared just seven years after Abel’s landmark text. In it, Gass developed a viewpoint that tied certain philosophical tendencies into novels. More importantly, he concluded that truth “has antipathy for art” (8). These two central ideas – that philosophy is inherent to the novel and that truth is opposed to art – led Gass to the understanding that by “the use of philosophical ideas in the construction of physical works” a writer ceases “to pretend that his business is to render the world; he knows...that his business is to make one” (24). Gass properly furthered Abel’s core concepts about the self-conscious construction of fictions by doing more of what Abel had successfully done: labeling and categorizing. By

attaching a light dose of philosophy to fiction, Gass was able to include fiction as a participant in a tradition of metaphysical thought. However, his use of “metafiction” in the essay is as undeveloped as it is brief. He simply used the term to rename the trend that was at the time called “antinovels” as it applied to “drearily predictable pieces about writers who are writing about what they are writing” (24-5). Although Gass was able to recognize the novel’s ability to embrace its fictionality and thereby transcend certain limitations, his interests led his work in a more abstract direction, focusing more on the form of fiction rather than its function or content.

Enter Inger Christensen and Patricia Waugh. Their books aimed to thoroughly decipher the purpose, form, and meanings of metafiction (*The Meaning of Metafiction* and *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, respectively) and were published three years apart in the early 1980s at a time when “novelists...[were becoming] much more aware of the theoretical issues involved in constructing fictions” (Waugh 2). Christensen’s book arrived first in 1981, spending the vast majority of its pages performing case studies on various authors and individual works, demonstrating the wide range of genres and stories in which metafiction can operate. Even the conclusion is rife with title-specific examples of metafiction. Rather than concluding with new ideas on the form and finally extrapolating the true meaning of metafiction as a whole— as the title “conclusion” would usually suggest – he stays close to his sample texts in the discussion and does little to stake out any meaning independent from the conclusions already drawn from the close studies of his previous chapters.

Patricia Waugh took up that task, choosing to elucidate the broad possibilities of the idea of metafiction instead of focusing on metafiction in action. She believes that “metafiction is a tendency or function inherent in *all* novels” (5). This statement is important for two reasons: first, it defines metafiction as “a tendency or function,” which not only excludes the possibility of considering metatextualism to be a genre, but halts any argument on the subject. Much like satire, metafiction is a mode of operation for authors. While a genre has a set of tropes, conventions, archetypes, or certain narratives, metatextualism can be applied to any genre to actively critique, evaluate, and expose said elements. “Metatext” can literally translate to “above the text,” which makes this relationship clearer. The meta elements in a text operate outside any genre conventions. Secondly, Waugh exposes the potential for ubiquity with metafiction. Seeing as all fictions are indeed creative works, there is always the option to form a dialogue within the work (literally between characters or figuratively) that involves creating fictions. There is not a film, novel, or story of any type that does not have the ability to refer to itself within itself, although very few do so to an extent that requires metatextual treatment.

Waugh does briefly consider a loose “spectrum” on which she places certain general categories of novels, but her strokes are far too broad to translate into any concrete system of categorization of texts. Nevertheless, she investigates the meta-problem more thoroughly than any other author before or since. It is also worth noting that, Waugh is quick to place metafiction “within a broader cultural movement often referred to as post-modernism,” as the two styles share “the same sense of crisis and loss

of belief in an external authoritative system of order” (21). Postmodernism is a fickle moniker for a movement with such an extensive list of inclusions. John Barth perhaps said it best when he called postmodernism “awkward and faintly epigonic” (qtd. in Waugh 21). Postmodernism is definitely a tough egg to crack and it may be best to cite the experts.

Life and art in the time of postmodernism become “empirical, chaotic, and heterogeneous,” sprawling into democratic territories, defining the self, and acting independently (Jameson 1). Fredric Jameson efficiently covers this varied gamut of postmodernism in his seminal text, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. One of the most important aspects of that text for this paper is his discussion of parody (16-19) that situates quality parody as a product of postmodernism. Parody is a strongpoint of metafiction, as asserted by Patricia Waugh. Parody is simply a method for investigating the nature of truth, but it is most expressly concerned with the truth of the form of the work. Parody is inherently metafictional. It shows that art “cannot be ‘original’, but has always been ‘created’ or produced”: thus it is parody’s job to reveal said truth behind these constructions (Waugh 67).

Unfortunately, relatively little has been written on the use of metafictional principles in film, especially in a book-long treatment. Quentin Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) and *Django Unchained* (2012) have both inspired collections on metacinema, although the essays focus mostly on intertextuality and alternate histories rather than self-conscious metacinematic elements or the dueling tension of fiction and reality. There are a number of articles concerning the metafictional aspects of films based

on the plays of William Shakespeare, but those owe more to the metatheatrical nature of the sources than the metacinematic techniques used in adapting Shakespeare's plays into films.

There is, however, a key early work that directly addresses actual metacinema and treats it as an independent object. In 1979, William Siska wrote the short article "Metacinema: A Modern Necessity," which skims the surface of metacinema, but touches on many of the main points of metacinematic films that are specifically concerned with film or filmmaking, diegetically speaking. He aptly divides these films into two categories: traditional and modernist. For example, *Day for Night* is metacinema in the traditional mode because "conflict arises from concrete problems whose solutions are found in the labor of production" whereas a film such as *8½* is considered modernist because "the conflicts are abstract dilemmas evolving from Guido's self-consciousness" (286-7). This divide proves helpful in separating and understanding the films to be discussed in this thesis' third chapter, as well as in bringing to light how very accessible most assessments are with all of metatextuality. As the body of this thesis will show, dividing and assessing films in this manner can help us to understand the devices and strategies used in all sorts of different metafictional films.

WHY METACINEMA? WHY NOW?

Metatextuality may sometimes feel like a very modern phenomenon, but if the above discussion is any indication, it has been around for quite some time in theatre and literature, and film is no exception. A popular early example is Buster Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), in which Keaton plays a film projectionist who dreams that he enters a film to

play the hero detective and win the girl. Metacinema could also be found in countries like Iran with *Haji Agha, the Cinema Actor* (Ohanian 1933) which features the director playing himself and the title character unwittingly starring in a *cinéma vérité*-esque picture. But metacinema even cropped up in the first decade of filmmaking, as evidenced by Edwin S. Porter's two-minute short *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (1902). While watching a series of short actuality films, Uncle Josh mistakes the projected images for real occurrences, even running away from an oncoming train like the legendary audience at the first film showing held by the Lumière Brothers. These early examples of metacinema were no less astute in mixing the fiction of film with an objective sense of reality than metacinematic films are today. But despite being a tendency that stretches back as far as cinema itself, metacinema is in dire need of serious investigation. Theatre and literature have dedicated time and thought to their subjects, and it is time to begin to cultivate the film community's own specific understanding of meta. However, we can certainly use the previous works mentioned to serve as a sturdy foundation. Metacinema is an increasingly employed technique in filmmaking and it is important to understand it. This thesis aims to begin forming that collective understanding of the term.

The current definition of metacinema that is most commonly used within film communities most closely resembles William Siska's. However, it fails to consider anything as metacinematic unless it is a film about film or filmmaking. Metafiction, as we have seen, is a flexible enough mode of creativity to allow a work to reflect on itself without looking directly at the moving parts. Which is to say, metacinema can push an

audience to question truth, reality, and heavy existential subjects like the meaning of life without showing cameras and boom mics. Metacinema is more than just films within or about films. Any film that investigates truth by examining performance, fiction or the construction thereof can be considered metacinematic.

In this thesis, I work to provide a detailed consideration of the three main categories of metacinema as I see them – parodies, films with a secondary fictional story within itself, and films with metacinematic treatments of performance and dreams. This is necessary because, as far as I know, there is no such road map or set of distinctions concerning how and why metacinematic films function. Metacinema can be found in any genre, time period, or artistic voice. Films such as *Adaptation* (Jonze 2002), *The Artist* (Hazanavicius 2011), *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (Allen 1985), *Atonement* (Wright 2007), *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (Reisz 1981), *The Matrix* (Wachowskis 1999), and *The Usual Suspects* (Singer 1995) possess functions that exceed regular cinematic expectations because they critique, explore, evaluate, and often blur the divide between fiction and reality. Following in the footsteps of *Hamlet* and *Life is a Dream*, or *Tristram Shandy*, metacinema approaches film with an expressed understanding of artifice inherent to the medium in order to expose it, with as many different purposes as there are films. The metacinematic qualities that these films and the ones included in this thesis express beg for in-depth study, and I feel compelled to do so. With certain choice films, I will discuss the broad categories into which most metacinematic works fall and give metacinema the attention it deserves.

METHODOLOGY

Certain Exclusions and Inclusions

Before discussing the outline for this thesis, it is important to detail some of the guiding decisions I made. Certain devices or tendencies in cinema which can be or are metafictional but will not be handled in this thesis must be briefly discussed. Voiceover, intertextuality, and mockumentaries will all be excluded from the body of this thesis for various reasons.

Voiceover narration applies only to narration where the voice of the character is heard, but the delivery is not seen, or the delivery is diegetic, as in Walter Neff's Dictaphone monologue in *Double Indemnity* (Wilder 1944). In general, an audience has little reason to believe that voiceover narration of any type indicates a significant self-awareness or a disruption of traditional storytelling despite the fact that it is directed straight at the audience. In the exemplary case of films noir, voiceover is simply a hold-over from the style of hard-boiled detective novels of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett and others. Similarly, most films employ voiceover in a fashion similar to literature as a storytelling aid: voiceover is an effective narrative short cut as it disseminates information quickly and directly. However, direct address is a metacinematic form of narration and it will be discussed in depth in the fourth chapter with *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (Hughes 1986).

The next notable exclusion concerns intertextual elements. I define these as films referencing other films with homages, imitations, and the like. *Boogie Nights* (Anderson 1997) features a fairly large number of allusions to other films, such as *Star Wars* (Lucas

1977), *Soy Cuba* (Kalatozov 1964), and *Nashville* (Altman 1975). While references to other films draw attention to the film as a constructed work of art, their function is not always self-referential or critical. The purpose of calling an inconsequential sound system featured early in the film “TK421” after the Stormtrooper that Han Solo poses as while rescuing Princess Leia is equal parts historical and cinephilic. This reference will only register for viewers who are detail-oriented fans of the *Star Wars* films. Metacinema is a technique that is always accessible to any viewer, regardless of foreknowledge, whereas intertextual references have a much smaller audience. “TK421” is no more than an easter egg that does not draw attention to itself. Its endgame is won as soon as it registers with an audience. There is no foreshadowing that Anderson associates with “TK421,” nor is there any perceivable comment his is making about the construction of film. Anderson is simply demonstrating a working knowledge of film history. While metatextuality functions above the text, intertextuality lives on the level of the texts, connecting – in this case – two separate texts in a very narrow way.

The strongest argument to be made for a highly intertextual film such as *Boogie Nights* being considered metacinematic would have to include the final reference and scene of the film that mirrors the final scene of *Raging Bull* (Scorsese 1980) in countless ways. Because of the nature of the scene, in which Dirk Diggler (Mark Wahlberg) is preparing to shoot a scene, there is a “metatextual hue” to the moment. This is furthered by the fact that his scene pays homage to a moment when Jake LaMotta (Robert De Niro) is preparing to perform by quoting the famous “I coulda been a contender” scene from *On The Waterfront* (Kazan 1954). Commenting on the scene for the DVD release,

director Paul Thomas Anderson said, “Where does this rotating fucking illusion end, that this guy just thinks he’s a movie star?” If there is an allusion specifically related to the nature of cinema and improper perception of a character’s reality, surely metacinema is at play? This is certainly more metacinematic than the “TK421” easter egg because it is more layered and provocative, but one instance of metacinematic flair does not merit giving a film the full treatment. As with most modes and styles, metacinema must pervade a film in a dominant manner for the film as a whole to be considered meta. Another film of Anderson’s, *Magnolia* (1999), is not considered a musical despite the fact that most of the cast inexplicably sings along to Aimee Mann’s “Wise Up” near the close of the film. In the same way that a non-musical film can feature musical moments without being labeled “a musical,” so can a non-meta film employ a metatextual element or two and still not be considered metacinematic.

For instance, Kevin Spacey’s passion project *Beyond the Sea* (2004) that tells the story of Bobby Darin’s dramatic life is framed by interactions with his younger self – or rather the boy Spacey’s Darin is casting as himself in a biopic. The film uses classical musical tropes to indulge in fantasy, but the metacinematic tension between reality and fiction comes from the blatant manipulations of his life story, namely the ending of the film that turns Darin’s death into an imagined musical number with boyhood and adult Darins. The consistent use of this fictionality and the strength of its presence at key moments are what make a film like *Beyond the Sea* metacinematic, through and through.

The third excluded topic is the mockumentary. Mockumentaries are films that adopt the documentary format for comedy’s sake when telling a fictional story while

framing it as true. This is absolutely, without a doubt, metacinematic in every way, shape, and form. Mockumentaries such as *This Is Spinal Tap* (Reiner 1984), *What We Do In The Shadows* (Clement, Waititi 2014), and *Zelig* (Allen 1983) will attest to the extreme metacinematic nature of such a mode of filmmaking. The matter is complicated by the fact that mockumentaries use a *non-fictional* mode of filmmaking to tell a fictional story, turning the typical metacinematic relationship on its head. Whereas most parodies – which is certainly the category to which mockumentaries belong – use classic narrative techniques to tell narrative stories, mockumentaries take advantage of the documentary style of filmmaking to emphasize the film’s fictional nature. For the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen to limit my scope to that of straightforward narrative films. The strategies and complex relationships between mockumentaries, their subjects, and their filmic target of parody are too disparate from the strategies of narrative parodies, and they are worthy of a more detailed study than I can provide here. In the Conclusion, I offer some thoughts and questions pertaining to mockumentaries as a field of study for metacinema.

In terms of what has been included in this analysis of metacinema, certain obvious choices have been made for the sake of time and space. Each chapter features four to five movies that have been chosen to represent tendencies more fully expressed when considering all of metacinema. Each film has been selected as a fine example of a larger trend. In the discussion of each example, it is my aim to draw conclusions that obtain for all similar films.

Goals

The following three chapters are arranged according to the characteristics of the aforementioned categories of metacinema I have devised. I use the term “category” to avoid framing the organization as a hierarchy. That is to say, no one category is more or less metacinematic than another. Each has its own merits, strategies, and goals. Each category also has an established text that guides the organization within the discussion of that category as it helps to clarify the purpose and perspective of each film. The three categories are Parody, Story within a Story, and Dreaming/Performance. These categories naturally evolved from the study of the literature on metatheatre and metafiction. Specifically, Patricia Waugh’s assertion that parody is inherently metafictional required that parody be included as a category unto itself. William Siska’s piece on metacinema helped to make clear that films with explicit fictional works within the films themselves deserved their own category because of their explicit but non-parodic reference to artifice. And finally, Lionel Abel’s two metatheatrical postulates signify the necessity to include films that treat the world as a stage or life as a dream – regardless of any lack of explicit filmic or fictional inclusions within the film – as wholly metacinematic.

Through the investigation and development of these three categories and the films they include, I will work to prove my working definition of metacinema: Metacinema is found in any film that consistently shows itself as a self-aware piece that examines the contradictory natures of truth and reality through the employment of a kind of fiction within the film itself.

THESIS OUTLINE

Chapter Two: Parodies

As Patricia Waugh noted, parody is a natural tactic for metafiction as it allows a text to “comment on a specific work or fictional mode” (4). This is especially true for film, which has allowed for entire franchises to be built on spoofs of popular genres, such as the *Scary Movie* franchise. The basic text that will inform the great majority of this chapter’s discussion of parody is Aristotle’s *Poetics*. In considering the mechanics of storytelling, Aristotle found that every visually told story had six basic elements: “Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Song,” the last of which we can call “melody” as is commonly done to make it more widely applicable to anything aural. Because parody deals directly with reexamining “how a particular set of contents [are] expressed in a particular set of conventions,” (Waugh 67) it is best to approach this subject from this elemental standpoint. All the films chosen parody genres in unique ways. Aristotle actually assigned ranks of importance to his six elements, treasuring plot above all else, character next, followed by thought, diction, melody, and then “the least artistic,” spectacle. Films typically reflect this order of substance, as plot and character and theme (the modern term for “thought”) are more intrinsic to a work and thus more likely to be parodied. Certain films selected for this chapter deal with some elements more in depth than others. First – dealing chiefly with theme amongst other things – is the romantic comedy parody *They Came Together* (Wain 2014). This is the most overtly metacinematic film of the chapter, as it features an exorbitant amount of winks and nudges – some of which are basically literal – to the audience about the parodic nature of

the film. This ends up playing out to the film's benefit, as the parody folds in on itself towards an end that creates striking a moment of realism immediately undercut by parody to contribute to a metacinematic treatment of the flighty themes commonly employed in romantic comedies.

The 2007 musical spoof *Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story* (Kasdan) uses its title character as played by John C. Reilly to parody typical biopics of famous musicians and the journeys of the main characters. Although the typical character arc that Cox follows is a partial parody of plot, the various celebrities that Cox metatextually emulates – Johnny Cash, Bob Dylan, and so forth – collectively form a film parodying character.

Additionally, the film's clever treatment of music as related to story parodies melody and its function in storytelling. The parallels made obvious in this film between music and story that are brought out by parodic lyrics create a metacinematic comment on melody.

Next, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (Gilliam, Jones 1975) parodies history in its treatment of the Arthurian legend. While the film also parodies various elements dealing with character – such as the bravery of knights – or melody in its treatment of song, the film is principally concerned with criticizing plot through its retelling of history in a farcical manner. As the discussion of *Holy Grail* will argue, by forming a metatextual plot centered on Arthurian legend, the film invites deep questioning on the constructed nature of history. As a secondary function, the film's use of dialogue as a source of confusion can be seen as a parody of diction.

No discussion of parody is complete without the inclusion of at least one Mel Brooks film. For the purposes of this work, *Blazing Saddles* (1974) is the most all

encompassing. Firstly, it deals with the spectacle of filmmaking in a metacinematic way, by parodying the extreme feats of physical prowess often glorified in western films as well as the actual construction of spectacle through some overt references to films and filmmaking. Of course, its treatment of the Western as a genre is perhaps the most complete genre parody of the films featured in this chapter as it is certainly in conversation for one of the most renowned parodies in film history.

George Roy Hill's 1969 film *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* functions a companion to *Saddles* by presenting an opposing form of parody. In his book *Parody as Film Genre: Never Give a Saga an Even Break*, Wes D. Gehring discusses the two types of film parody as he sees them: "the broad and obvious puncturing of a genre or auteur, and a more subdued approach that manages comic deflation with an eventual reaffirmation of the subject under attack" (6). The former is easily placed in the metacinematic tradition with *Blazing Saddles*, but the latter proves a difficult case. The example Gehring chiefly uses to exemplify the subdued parody is *Butch Cassidy*. The film plays around with older traditions of the western and "the tongue-in-cheek humor found in the swashbuckling adventure film" (Gehring 8), but its metacinematic qualities that make it a reaffirmation parody are more subdued. By breaking certain rules of the genre as were understood at the time – featuring affable train robbers as protagonists, placing them on the run, giving them ironic senses of humor, and especially making them uncomfortable with violence and murder – screenwriter William Goldman turned plot and character on its head while gently reaffirming the genre in "eventual celebration" (Gehring xviii).

This second chapter will work to expose the inner workings of metacinema as style that has an all but helpless impulse for parody. A film cannot parody the conventions of film without using metacinematic techniques that reflect on the work itself as it plays out.

Chapter Three: Story Within A Story

The next chapter will discuss the metacinematic natures of films that make explicit use of storytelling or its process within the film. This requirement can be met in several ways, which the four films selected will exemplify. It bears noting that it is not required that film or the filmmaking process be involved for a film to be considered metacinema. Any artificial story or indication thereof taking place within the film is enough to investigate it as metacinematic.

The films chosen for this chapter reflect William Siska's keen yet simple division of metacinema into traditional and modern metatexts. The central conflicts traditional films are more concerned with are the practical problems and complications that arise from characters creating or working with fiction, whereas "the conflict is a metaphysical one" in modern metacinema (Siska 287). Supplementing Siska's text is the question, "Does life reflect art, or does art reflect life?" Each film will approach these two dichotomies in a way unique from the other three. The traditional film to be discussed that posits that art reflects life is Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998). Revolving around Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey) as the star of a reality series to which he is initially oblivious, the film follows his journey to complete awareness with metacinematic aplomb. The film's frank handling of the dichotomy for reality and the veil of the reality

television show – which is actually a world-wide conspiracy of false impressions – places it squarely in the traditional column.

The other traditional film that argues for life reflecting art is *The Red Shoes* (1948), as written and directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. The story in this case is a ballet based on the Hans Christian Andersen tale that so tellingly doubles as the title for the film. The ballet that the three central characters create together winds up bearing striking resemblances to their lives, underscoring Powell and Pressburger's argument that life reflects art. For instance, both Victoria Page (Maira Shearer) – the principal dancer – and her character in the ballet are often slaves to dancing and are portrayed as helpless in many situations. This intertwining of the ballet and the plot of the film blur the lines between fiction and reality and serve as the crux of the film's metacinematic aspects.

Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966) is similarly concerned with the melding of life and fiction, although from a decidedly different standpoint. The modernist film portrays "[t]he hopeless dream of being" as "the shared condition of both life and film art" (Michaels 18). Through the portrayal of an excruciatingly complicated and terse central female relationship coupled with seemingly unrelated filmic presences in the form of cameras and the like, the film's thesis implies the impossibility of film accurately capturing life, and therefore, art reflecting life as mere imitation. The audience witnesses the literal breakdown of film as a medium as part of the story, thereby throwing doubt on the veracity of anything portrayed. Although the film does not explicitly contain any fictions within itself, the constant exposure of cameras and celluloid point to the film's

argument against fiction being capable of communicating reality. It also places this film squarely in the “Story within a Story” category as it purposefully includes film and the filmmaking process.

The final film of the chapter is the modernist *Close-Up* (Kiarostami 1990), a crown jewel of Iranian cinema. The film’s labyrinthine blending of reality, fiction, and reenactments pull focus from any concrete conflict that is a part of the film’s plot. All those present on camera play themselves, although the constructed scenes and elements of this story bring into question how much of this “documentary” can be taken at face value, if any. *Close-Up*’s main character – Sabzian – expresses the desire to live a fiction more than he desires to live life, and the film’s construction supports this desire in certain ways. *Close-Up* is based in some truth, as Sabzian actually did pose as Iranian film director and friend of Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and he is guilty of the crimes of which he is accused in the film. *Close-Up*’s collage of reality and artifice work to convince its audience that life truly does reflect art.

Chapter Four: Performance and Dreaming in Reality

The fourth and final analytic chapter tackles the platform that is perhaps most elusive. The films that comprise this type of metacinema are the furthest removed from the subject of creative fictions in the classical sense, yet the closest to the heart of the reality/fiction polarity. They are devoid of any reference to or inclusion of a separation between the real and the artistically contrived, which means that film, filmmaking, or any classically constructed fiction has no bearing on the tensions between fiction and truth in the film. The metacinematic qualities in these films are borne of a fiction within the story

that is – in one way or another – accepted as a part of the reality of the film’s universe. On this platform, the guiding text is comprised of nothing other than Lionel Abel’s two postulates of metatheatre: “(1) the world is a stage and (2) life is a dream” (105). With each of these metafictional tenets, autonomy proves to be an important factor in its representation within each film.

Alfred Hitchcock’s masterpiece *Vertigo* (1958) is widely known for its commentary on performance and its constructed nature. Of course, what makes this applicable to this third platform of metacinema is the fact that Judy Barton (Kim Novak) is not playing the part of Madeleine Elster in a play or a film but in the (fictionally) real life of Scottie Ferguson (James Stewart). *Anna Karenina* and *Vertigo* form two sides of a coin involving everyday performance. *Anna Karenina* presents a world where performance is a contrivance inflicted upon our protagonist, whereas *Vertigo* shows us a protagonist who requires performance from others. Not all the world is a stage for Hitchcock, but it can be if you want it to be.

Few films have taken Shakespeare’s immortal metaphor more literally than Joe Wright’s *Anna Karenina* (2012). The majority of the film is placed – not set – in a theatre and the characters show no sign of being aware of such a device. When the characters are in a city – either St. Petersburg or Moscow – the action is mounted in a theatre, either onstage or in the house. Anything that occurs in the countryside is filmed at a natural location. This may seem pretentious or overdone, but Wright and his screenwriter, the metafictional expert Tom Stoppard, aim to frame the bourgeoisie society as a theatre where all the persons are expected to act, speak, and look a certain way. The literal

theatrical setting is meant to emphasize this performance that takes place within the relative reality of the story. Such a device encourages an audience to reflect on their own individual societies and evaluate the level of performance actually required for day-to-day operations, as is the case with the characters in the film.

To close out the performative approach to metacinema, I will discuss the metacinematic use of narration in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. Ferris' (Matthew Broderick) direct address to the camera breaks the fourth wall and suggests that his monologues to the audience are moments of truth. These moments of honesty contrast his constant performing for friends, parents, and teachers. This reversed dichotomy of performance within the film while remaining honest to an audience expecting a performance gives the film a metacinematic quality that often accompanies films with direct address.

The last pair of films fleshes out the "life is a dream" abstraction, again from opposite ends of the spectrum. Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010) partially inhabits a literal dreamworld where characters can learn to control and shape their own subconscious. Naturally, the dreamworld and the happenings therein can have strong effects on the real world, such as death in a dream equaling death in real life. *Inception's* mind-bending plot mechanics are second to its theme, which a minor character states perhaps a bit too succinctly when referring to the judgment of a cellar of dream-junkies: "The dream has become their reality. Who are you to say otherwise?" As we are reminded several times throughout the film, dreams and reality can be hard to separate.

Solaris (Tarkovsky 1972) presents a similarly seductive sedated state wherein the hero of the film – an astronaut on a remote space station – is confronted and haunted by

the memory of his dead wife (coincidentally akin to Leonardo DiCaprio's Cobb in *Inception*). By the end of the film, Kris Kelvin (Donatas Banionis) is forced to choose between the possibility of a continued existence with his dearly departed on the surface of the mysterious planet Solaris and the assurance of a life he already knows back on Earth. In the end, Kelvin is on Solaris, in a reproduction of his life. This definite ending is decidedly different from the ambiguous resolution Nolan leaves with us at the end of *Inception*, as the audience is left without any surefire way of clearly telling whether or not Cobb chose to realize a manufactured dream or if his dream of reuniting with his children became an actual reality.

Here we find the key difference between these two metafictional worlds. Cobb is a craftsman of dreams. He knows them in and out. He is at all times conscious of where he is in respect to reality and fiction. Yet in the end, he is faced with a choice between the two, and we are left wondering where his heart fell. This is Nolan's design, to present the question, "Does it really matter which he chose?" Whichever realm Cobb resigned himself to inhabit became *his reality*. On the other hand, Kelvin is assaulted by his dreams and memories. He is in a subordinate position when it comes to the onslaught of fiction. He is mostly able to discern what belongs to which, but at the ending of the film, it is unclear as to whether or not it was his choice to continue inhabiting Solaris. After trying to separate and classify the separate realities of the film becomes a moot point, the only direction for thought is inward. Metacinema graduates from discerning truth of the film to truth of the self.

Closing this chapter will be the study of John Hughes' teen comedy *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986). At first glance, this film may seem straightforward and far from metacinematic, but Ferris Bueller's (Matthew Broderick) constant direct addresses and asides to the camera highlight some extremely metacinematic elements, effectively combining the two guiding postulates from the chapter. The film chronicles a crazy day in the life of Bueller and his two closest companions, and the day is impossibly packed with a professional baseball game, fancy lunches, "priceless works of art," a German heritage parade performance, and much more. The fantastical elements of the day are in some way grounded by the fact that Ferris continually acknowledges our presence: his awareness of reality places one foot in the real world while his day looks completely unrealistic.

The direct address also emphasizes the constant performance that Ferris is putting on. In his first scene, he plays sick for his parents, and breaks "character" to wink at his sister and shush her. After he gets away with it, Ferris turns to the camera and lets us in on his secret: "Incredible. One of the worst performances of my career and they never doubted it for a second." From then on, we follow Ferris as he presents a cultivated version of himself to peers, family, and even Cameron and Sloane. The Ferris seen in the direct addresses becomes the only true version of this fictional character.

Chapter Five: The Conclusion

In this relatively brief closing, I will summarize my findings. I will also pose questions that can be answered and propose more unexplored territory, both in the

ongoing study of metacinema. Hopefully, this will be able to serve as a starting point for further studies and assertions as to the nature and devices of metacinema.

LOOKING FORWARD

Hopefully it is clear by now how deserving of analysis metacinema is. With such definitive works in the fields of theatre and literature, it is time to start working in earnest towards one of film's own. This thesis does not intend to be definitive or comprehensive: such an ambition would be folly in most any field. It is more the aim of this work to help to lay a foundation upon which a more general and widespread understanding of one of the most interesting trends of cinema can be discussed and thought.

The films selected as representative of the categories of metacinema are not meant to exhaust all the types of films possible but to demonstrate the variability with which metacinema can act and to serve as a skeleton of sorts, sketching out the basic frame and function of metacinema. In reading on, it is important to understand that metacinema is an extension of most any style of film in that it strives to investigate truth in some manner. It is simply my opinion that it does so with more vim, vigor, and veracity than any of the other forms of film that are currently available.

Chapter Two: Parodies

The light comedic tones of parody are simultaneously its greatest faults and strengths. The focus on laughs and entertainment value in parodies often prevents them from being seen as films of critical value. But in fact, the very nature of parody is such that a parody could never be anything besides critical. Wes D. Gehring wrote extensively on parodies in his aforementioned book, *Parody as Film Genre: Never Give a Saga an Even Break*. As the title indicates, Gehring sees parody as a genre unto itself. Although this view of parody does not fit in the larger framework of metacinema as I have established, Gehring's defining elements of parody are essential to understanding any conception of parody. His "seven pivotal characteristics of parody" (16) will be unearthed as this chapter progresses, but his seventh (and most relevant) needs to be discussed now. Gehring says that "movie self-consciousness represents the ultimate parody prick, since nothing affectionately deflates a celebrated genre or auteur faster than a comic reminder that this is, indeed only a movie" (16). This is the very heart of parody's inherent metacinematic abilities. Parody's entire arsenal is found in the way it examines its subjects, rooting through the tropes and conventions of a genre or the thematic and stylistic tendencies of a writer/director to simultaneously evaluate the medium and its message.

In another characteristic – the third to be exact – Gehring aptly separates parody from its cousin, satire, which is another important distinction to establish here. While parody in film focuses on deconstructing cinema itself, satire is concerned with deconstructing human nature, often dwelling on its more unappealing aspects (5). Simply

put, parody comments on the medium while satire comments on society. Gehring acknowledges some of the crossover that occurs between these two modes, but for our purposes, satire will remain entirely out of the conversation, as it has no metacinematic bearing.

In both satire and parody, farce plays a big part. Farce, according to the Oxford Dictionary of English, is comprised of “buffoonery,” “horseplay,” and “ludicrously improbable situations.” Farce can easily be considered its own genre. Farces share many distinguishing characteristics with one another, such as large numbers of irrational, oversexed couples, mistaken identities, isolated locations, and the list goes on. Films such as *Smiles of a Summer Night* (Bergman 1955), *The Rules of the Game* (Renoir 1939), and *Burn After Reading* (Coen, Coen 2008) exemplify these trends. Farce’s tendencies and tropes are abundant in both parody and satire, as both rely on exaggerated situations and reactions for the sake of comedy and criticism. However, a generic treatment of farce does not factor into this thesis’ discussion on parody. A more general view of farce as a fundamental aspect of parody and satire, but not as a genre unto itself, will be adopted here. Overdone comedic situations and exaggerated characters and realities that come from farce are essential to parody, but these elements must be understood as a natural part of parodic expression instead of elements borrowed from another genre, at least for the purposes of this paper.

In the same way that I must deny farce its standing as a genre, I must also reiterate my denial of parody as a genre as Wes Gehring asserts. But again, this does not discredit the validity of the characteristics he assigns to parody. Gehring’s first characteristic of

parody is simple, in that he maintains that parodies “should be funny even without viewer expertise on the subject under comic attack” (2). This is the element of farce at play, as farce has an incredibly broad appeal. One does not need to understand 1970s disaster movies in order to appreciate the literal smoking airlines ticket in *Airplane!* (Zucker, Abrams, Zucker 1980). Gehring is quick to point out, though, that the experience is richer if the viewer is versed in the parodied subject. The same is true for metacinema: a viewer could appreciate the comedy and fantastical happenings of *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (Allen 1985) without picking up on its themes on loneliness and the dangers of overindulgence in fantasy. Much in the same way that *Cairo*’s success as metacinema is reliant on its ability to ride out the tension between fantasy and reality in cinema, a parody’s success is reliant on the film’s ability to accurately recreate and poach the tropes of its target genre.

This is the basis for Gehring’s second characteristic: the filmmaker must be “thoroughly versed in the subject under attack” in order to allow a parody to more fully execute its goal of “creative criticism” (3). A parody can be farcical to a fault, but without an indictment of something filmic, it is not a parody in the first place. It is an obvious conclusion, but it is important to understand how much a parody is made up of something else’s DNA. This is what prevents me from considering parody as a genre unto itself. As I discussed in the previous chapter, metacinema operates above the text and its attributes. Because genre is woven into text, a style of filmmaking that critiques that genre cannot be a genre all its own. Parody – especially for purposes of this thesis – is a mode of filmmaking that can only be closely attached to whatever genre it is attacking in each

respective film. Additionally, because parody can work in so many ways, it does not have its own set of tropes in the same way that romantic comedies or science-fiction films do.

For example, *Airplane!* fully embraces the disaster film genre with its expansive cast, stunt casting, and a seemingly unavoidable crisis affecting many people in a vulnerable and enclosed space. Although it pokes fun at these elements, it makes them a part of the story, thereby submitting itself to the disaster film tradition. I make this distinction to say that the films heavily featured in this chapter will be discussed as being a part of the genres they spoof. Furthermore, their connections to and deconstructions of genres are more detail-oriented than a simple ironic treatment of a genre's tent-pole signifiers as the list associated with *Airplane!* might suggest.

These details are best organized by way of Aristotle's immortal *Poetics*. It may seem an outdated choice, but storytelling has remained relatively constant: so much so that parody even predates Aristotle himself (Gehring 1). In *Poetics*, Aristotle establishes the "six constituent elements" of tragedy and their "relative importance" (25; 27). In order of importance, the elements are as follows: plot, character, theme, diction, melody, and spectacle.

His restriction of these elements to tragedy is irrelevant here. Aristotle's limitation of the elements to tragedy was purposeful, but it can be disregarded for our modern purposes. He makes it clear that "comedy did escape notice in the beginning because it was not taken seriously" (24). Comedy used to employ what Aristotle calls "the lampooning mode" instead of "arguments, that is, plots, of a general nature" (24). He also implies that comedy portrays people inaccurately (18). And while comedy is certainly not

the critical or cultural darling of today's society, it has certainly risen in status in the past two-thousand-plus years. Comedy of Aristotle's time was not at all what we see in modern comedies. the three-act structure in screenplays is ubiquitous in virtually all narratives, regardless of genre, mode, or regional origin. This structure unifies storytelling across genre, and it allows comedy to represent life in a fashion as realistic as any drama by treating both as equals in the eyes of narrative. Aristotle pointed to the absence of integrity in plots of the comedies of his day, calling comedies "painless" in reference to the lack of consequence of stories (24). But the three-act structure allows for plots as sophisticated and consequential as dramas' to work for comedies as well. Because of this, comedies' stories operate in the same exact way as dramas and we can apply Aristotle's six characteristics to parodies as a means of understanding how they skewer cinemas of all types.

Aristotle's foremost narrative element is the plot itself. Strictly speaking, plot can refer to the order in which the story's events are presented, instead of the broader conception which is the events as organized linearly as well as events that occur prior to the first event portrayed – in these cases – onscreen. These ideas are clarified by David Bordwell's use of the Russian terms *fabula* and *syuzhet*. *Fabula* refers to the streamlined linear narrative that can be constructed during and after viewing the film, while *syuzhet* refers to the "actual arrangement and presentation of the fabula in the film" (Bordwell 49-50). Of course, parody tackles both of these narrative elements.

The remaining elements are less complex and Aristotle gives them in the following order: character, theme, diction ("verbal expression"), melody ("song-

composition”), and spectacle (“visual adornment”) (Aristotle 28-9). Aristotle’s hierarchy has stood the test of time, as we will see the selected films of this chapter parodying these elements with a bias towards the more important elements. These six characteristics encompass the whole of dramatic structure, as elements specific to film can be included in one of the six with ease. For instance, if a film were to parody an extreme style of editing, that could easily be included with spectacle, as it is part of the “visual adornment” of film. Spoofing a style of opening or closing credits would be included under plot because, as Bordwell asserts, “[c]redit sequences are very important narrational gestures” (66). Aristotle’s *Poetics* will continue to prove a helpful guide as we investigate the means and methods parodies employ and to what end.

This chapter features four mainstream parodies that each parody multiple elements from Aristotle’s *Poetics*. However, each film has an element that stands above the rest as the focus of its parody. In *They Came Together* (Wain 2014), five elements serve the remaining one, theme, in a grand indictment of the general worldview purported by romantic comedies. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (Gilliam, Jones 1975) uses the familiar basis of the Arthurian legend to parody plot from an historical perspective. *Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story* takes advantage of the genre of musical biopic to thoroughly parody melody. In *Blazing Saddles* (1974), Mel Brooks eventually makes use of the destruction of spectacle to lovingly parody the entire Western genre. Finally, we reach *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (Hill 1969), the lone parody of reaffirmation. Instead of parodying specific elements, *Butch* alternately embraces and inverts the tropes of its genre as a whole, ending with a solid reaffirmation of the Western.

“I LOVE FICTION BOOKS. DO YOU?” – “NO. THEY’RE NOT REAL.” – PARODYING THEME IN *THEY CAME TOGETHER*

The first of five films for this chapter that I will discuss will be what I find to be the most overtly parodic of the bunch: *They Came Together*. For this reason, it will be the longest discussion of any film in the chapter. *They Came Together* parodies each of Aristotle’s elements in great detail and will therefore serve to demonstrate the way in which I will be approaching these films as well as some of the many ways in which each element can be parodied.

Directed and co-written by comedian David Wain of “Stella” fame, he and his group of usual collaborators are no stranger to parody. The likes of producer, co-writer, and fellow Stella member Michael Showalter and a bevy of actors from past Wain efforts such as *Wet Hot American Summer* (2001) – including the final Stella member, Michael Ian Black – provide an experienced crew for “overt” parody, as Gehring calls it (6). This amalgamation of parody experts work together to attack each of Aristotle’s six elements as they apply to the romantic comedy with the ultimate purpose of deflating their usual themes.

Setting the stage in the opening scene of the film are the main characters, Joel (Paul Rudd) and Molly (Amy Poehler), who are out to dinner with friends Karen and Kyle (Ellie Kemper and Bill Hader). As with all parodies, the style of the film so closely mimics its skewered genre that it is not until Joel adds a comment to the benign conversation and proceeds to throw his mouth open and cross his eyes as he goes to drink his wine that the over-the-top tone is totally obvious. Soon, the dialogue turns self-aware: Joel and Molly begin to frame their love affair in retrospect, immediately calling their

relationship “a corny, romantic comedy kinda story.” Molly describes Joel as a casting agent would, citing his looks as “vaguely, but not overtly Jewish” and Joel in turn stereotypes her as the “cute, klutzy girl that sometimes will drive you a little bit crazy but you can’t help but fall in love with her.” Lest it not be obvious enough, Kyle responds, “So we have our main characters...” and Joel immediately makes it a point to include New York City as the third main character. Karen reiterates this with a superfluous question, and we are quickly escorted to a title-sequence montage that begins exactly as Kyle suggests: “with aerial shots of the Manhattan skyline.”

The narration over the sequence is just as soaked in exaggeration as the previous scene. With an appropriate mix of farcical humor (Joel’s then-girlfriend who is so perfect that the bed sheet covers her breasts even when standing up or Molly being so klutzy that she cannot walk across her bedroom without knocking over random boxes), the montage leans into the peppy, happy-go-lucky tones that so often accompany the openings of romantic comedies of more recent years. This includes many films that are directly parodied in *Together: You’ve Got Mail* (Ephron 1998), *When Harry Met Sally...* (Reiner 1989), and even Woody Allen’s Manhattan-set romances (Lewis). And in case anyone would have missed it earlier, Joel and Molly remind us how essential New York City itself is to understanding the story and the characters again in voiceover.

The constant harping on New York City’s importance parodies the fetishized image Manhattan has garnered over the years by being the host to the romances listed above and countless more. As a parody, *Together* has the responsibility of taking an aspect of the original texts and teasing it out past its logical extreme. The film uses the

skeleton of *You've Got Mail* as a basis for Molly and Joel's journey – just substitute candy shops for bookstores. *Mail* also models the stereotypical New York City vibe *Together* parodies so harshly. These depictions of New York City project an image of a city so great and so diverse that only *it* could contain and bring together two people of such disparate corporate backgrounds. Also, as a montage later in the film parodies, New York City in the fall is supposedly the most romantic setting in the country. We see the happy couple at the height of their love throwing leaves at each other, playing football in the park, and having fun with oranges and apples at sidewalk vendors. Of course, the leaves are overly saturated with red and orange and cover a corpse, and Joel nails Molly in the face with the football, giving her an extremely bloody nose, but kissing her all the same. Rudd and Poehler play these moments with gleeful abandon, making too much of the exhilaration of a new love for any of it to feel authentic.

These instances are representative of the majority of the over-the-top jokes in the film. However, between all of these tonal markers that label this film as an overt parody are key details that contribute to the film's goal of tearing down the worldview of romantic comedies. Some elements contribute more than others, and as we work our way through Aristotle's elements, we shall see the more important ones carrying more of the load. To begin with, the spectacle of the film is, at times, unremarkable or ordinary. By placing the film in contemporary times instead of the late 1980s or 1990s (the heyday of Ephron-esque rom-coms), Wain and Showalter limited themselves in what visuals could be parodied, as period films often supply more fodder for retrospective criticism of fashion or décor. Instead, Wain and longtime production designer Mark White opted to

nestle the visual parody in smaller places. Joel's apartment is a bona fide joke in and of itself. His walls are adorned with empty film reels, multiple clocks right next to one another, a "Stop" sign, a "One Way Only" sign, and a vintage Pepsi-Cola advertisement. The apartment itself houses an obscure pinball game, two globes of the world, and a flat screen television inexplicably mounted on an easel. Complete with a wall of exposed brick, a ceiling as high as a sound stage's, and a variety of other unrelated items, the apartment feels about as genuine as the emotion of any given scene, which is to say not at all.



Figure 1: One angle of Joel's apartment with superfluous, clashing items.

Other parodic moments of spectacle are less subtle. In a scene where Molly wants to make herself presentable for a nervous Joel who is pacing outside her candy shop practicing an apology, she emerges from the back of the store to declare to her friend Wanda (Teyonah Parris), "I look like a chimney sweep!" Of course, she is dressed as a chimney sweep, complete with broom and soot. She proceeds to try on a variety of

outlandish outfits to mock 1980s rock for Wanda – a Jackie O. pillbox hat and pink suit, a tennis outfit, and a 1980s gothic-grunge number – before finally emerging to greet Joel in a complete suit of armor.

This goes hand in hand with a later scene. After expressing concerns to Wanda about being unsure if Joel is “the one,” Molly follows Wanda’s advice and changes the way she looks – “just a tiny little bit” – in the hopes that Joel takes notice. Molly shows up to dinner wearing Groucho Marx glasses. Joel casually points them out, and Molly is beyond impressed. These two parodies of spectacle relate to the constant reinforcement in romantic comedies that a woman’s appearance is all-important. While the 1980s montage is also something of a narrative convention, it does more for the character to show her worried about her looks than it does for the film’s skewering of fluffy sequences. The Groucho glasses bit shows how women in romantic comedies believe a man’s attention to their physical appearance to be an actual caring sentiment.

The inauthenticity continues through our investigation of *They Came Together*’s melody. Matt Novack and Craig Wedren’s score is at times unobtrusive, but in moments such as the costume montage, it clearly aims to outdo the models it finds in Hollywood rom-coms. But the most parodic and metacinematic use of song accompanies the montage depicting fall in New York City. Norah Jones, who has parodied herself and her own brand of bluesy love songs in *Ted* (McFarlane 2012), and NBC’s *30 Rock*, sings the song “It Was the Last Thing On Your Mind” that plays over the scene. After a while, the montage turns into a music video for the song. The aspect ratio of the film widens and the color temperature is significantly bluer as the camera slides up a piano in a recording

studio and we find Norah Jones playing. The song's information is displayed in the lower left corner of the frame not long before Paul Rudd and Amy Poehler enter the studio as fictionalized versions of themselves. Rudd sports heavy-framed glasses and a soul patch, while Poehler spends most of the time wearing sunglasses indoors. They interact with the musicians, ineptly play some instruments, and run into old friends – Adam Scott and John Stamos – who are inexplicably running the soundboards. After the song fades out, Wain cuts back to the dinner scene where Kyle expresses interest in procuring his own copy of the song, implying that he – and presumably the entire dinner party – had heard the song.

Here, *Together* places one foot out of strict parody and slides it closer to the second category of metacinema where there is an acknowledged work of fiction within the movie. This is a somewhat common trend with parodies, as we will see later with *Blazing Saddles* and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Each of these films breaks out of its respective shell for different reasons. *They Came Together* uses the music video parody to harp on the obligatory “falling in love” montage of films. It could have easily been sufficiently parodic without zooming out of the story to include Jones and the fictionalized stars, but by doing so Wain and Showalter are able to criticize the tendency in the film industry to capitalize on songs that are tied to a certain film. In fact, when Kyle asks if he and Karen can get their own copy of the song, Amy says that “all the internet download services’ll have it” and she and Joel name some: i-Tones, Rhapsory, Amasong, and Svandorga, obvious references to iTunes, Rhapsody, Amazon, and Pandora. (In reality, the song is actually available for purchase through these platforms.) This bold interlude of sorts further criticizes the deep levels of artifice in the romantic

comedy. Instead of focusing on just how manufactured those montages are in their own right, the filmmakers take the opportunity to criticize part of the blatantly commercial, extra-filmic motive behind these constructions.

The film's criticism of diction, however, is well within the boundaries of standard parody. Dialogue is tackled in two distinct ways: through motifs that pop up throughout the picture, and in longer, drawn-out instances. One obvious example of the latter occurs approximately fourteen minutes into the film after Joel has just proposed to his girlfriend, Tiffany (Cobie Smulders), while she is mid-coitus with a business enemy of Joel's, Trevor (Michael Ian Black). Dismayed, Joel ends up in a bar where a bartender remarks, "You look like you've had a bad day." Joel responds with a curt, "Tell me about it," so the bartender explains: "Well, you came in here looking like crap and you haven't said very much." Still miserable, Joel says, "You can say that again." The bartender repeats his last comment. Joel repeats *his* first comment. The bartender repeats his last one again. So Joel repeats his *second* comment. The film completes this loop of four lines almost four times before Kyle from the restaurant cuts in and puts a stop to it. It even uses the same exact shot of the bartender saying his one line every single time, as evidenced by Joel repeatedly wiping his mouth with his sleeve at the same point in each take. By dwelling so long on this hollow exchange, Wain and Showalter are showing how easy it is to convey a character in despair. Joel does not even say anything about how broken up he is, but it is clear from his delivery and the bartender's observation that an audience is meant to read this as a low point for Joel. More to the point, it shows how little thought screenwriters can (and sometimes do) put into a moment to make it clear that a character

is in a prescribed state of vulnerability and hurt in order for him to be properly prepared to meet his next romantic interest in a state that best suits the tone of the story. Indeed, it is important that Joel be disillusioned with love as he initially rejects Molly as a potential mate when they first meet at mutual friends' Halloween party.

One of the more subtle recurring parodies of rom-com dialogue occurs – by my count – five times throughout the film. In each case, a character leaves the room feeling hurt and a character (usually the one at fault) whispers, “Shit” after they close the door. When we first see this, Tiffany says it as Joel leaves when he discovers her affair with Trevor. Another time, Molly leaves the Halloween party after overhearing Joel disparaging her and one of their mutual friends – Brenda (Melanie Lynskey) – gets to deliver the line. Both of those instances are fairly believable, but when Molly whispers it after Wanda leaves her apartment on good terms, it is clear that the “shit” whisper is not meant to be taken seriously.

This is better understood with the full context of the Molly-Wanda scene preceding it, which is connected to another recurring parody of diction. Several times throughout the movie, a character will call out to another character to “Wait!” before leaving. This is met by a pause from the exiting character, and they are thanked in a quiet, overly sincere manner. In one scene, Joel calls after and thanks his brother Jake (Max Greenfield) three times, who – in between each time – stops Joel and encourages or thanks him. This is a common button for a scene in all kinds of movies and Wain and Showalter use it multiple times, each time heightening the length or ridiculousness of the exchange, undercutting its original dramatic intention. In the Molly-Wanda scene, Wanda

has given Molly her costume to wear at the Halloween party (which farcically turns out to be the same Benjamin Franklin costume Joel wears that night). Molly thanks Wanda, who responds with an emphatic, “No! Thank you!” Despite the fact that Molly has done nothing for Wanda, Molly says a gracious “You’re welcome.” As Wanda leaves, Molly calls to her to wait, and she thanks Wanda again, this time with even more false emotion. Wanda smiles and exits as Molly calls to her again, but Wanda does not hear. Apparently crestfallen, Molly whispers a despondent “Shit.” What does Molly have to be upset about? Nothing, unless it was truly necessary that she thank Wanda again. (It was not.)

Wain and Showalter undoubtedly made this conscious effort for comedic effect, but it also works as a criticism of lazy dialogue shortcuts. Having a character deliver a whispered “shit” is a great deal easier than having a character get the opportunity to express his or her feelings to the departing character in a complex manner. This dictional parody is also the first indication, as we work our way through the parodied elements, of parody’s inclination to move quickly through a film’s motions. In the same way that screenwriters are taught to get a story moving quickly, establish characters, conflict, and cause with no time to lose, parodies seek to exaggerate this tendency by using shortcuts in dialogue, as evidenced by the bar scene with Joel and these “shit” whispers.

They Came Together’s parody of character also contributes to criticism of the lazy economy of romantic comedy screenwriting. In a standard romantic comedy, the leads’ romantic histories are integral to understanding the characters as well as the basic mechanics of the film. In establishing Molly’s history, Wain and Showalter make some purposefully broad strokes.

In a key scene that lasts barely three minutes, we learn that Molly has a son from a man who is currently serving time in jail, where she would go if she were ever to bail on a wedding, and that another ex of hers cheated on her with a yoga instructor, forcing her to a life of Pilates. Also packed in this scene is Molly's son emotionally attaching himself to Joel, Joel psyching himself out of engaging with Molly because she says "Hey" just like Tiffany used to, and – of course – Joel gets his very own "shit" whisper. The emotional roller coaster of the scene feels as ridiculous as it sounds. Not only does Molly's son call Joel "Daddy" after a brief conversation about Pokémon and a magic trick, but a perfectly good romantic connection is emphatically dismissed with overreactions to trivial moments. When Joel recoils after Molly says "Hey" before moving in to kiss him, Molly lashes out, telling him about Frank and the yoga instructor to point out that he is not the only one with a painful romantic past.

This three-minute scene is far from the only example of character as caricature for parody's sake. Before the Halloween party, we learn that Joel has a haunting Halloween memory from a "Dick or Teat" assault by a group of teenage boys. Of course, this fear never resurfaces and the story only functions as a spoof of attempts to provide character depth. Wain and Showalter understand that character depth does not come from a character's history, but from complex motivations that result in complex actions. In fact, the conversation that motivates Joel to propose to Tiffany is between him and four of his buddies during a game of basketball where they each – through very specific, self-aware language – reveal themselves to be representative of different pieces of his conscience. In *They Came Together*, character action is paper-thin for more than the sake of parody: in

this basketball scene, Wain and Showalter expose the writer – as Lionel Abel would have done – to show that the mechanics of the romantic comedy do not lie in any character that represents reality, but in a formula of specifically arranged stick figures and incidents.

These incidents are – in some ways – less predictable than one would expect them to be in *They Came Together*. Yes, the film hits all the regular plot points with parodic, gleeful abandon: the meet-cute that starts the titular couple off on the wrong foot, the courtship as captured by the Norah Jones montage, the falling out that drives the main characters to other, poorly matched lovers, and the triumphant and dramatic reunion in the middle of an undesired wedding. But part of parody's intimate relationship with farce means the exaggerated buffoonery of farce is woven into almost every event of a parody. Additionally, part of parody's responsibility to subvert the original conventions manifests itself in subverting the smallest of things. All of these things – farce, subversion of genre, subversion of expectation – come together in a short sequence approximately forty-five minutes into the picture. Joel and Molly have just returned from their first official date to find her house empty. Seizing the alone time, they begin to kiss wildly, knocking over a lamp right away. As the scene continues, the casualties of Molly's décor mount. They back into a wicker shelving unit of figurines and trinkets before it becomes clear that the destruction is being overdone. More wicker shelves fall after Molly purposefully grabs one and throws it to the ground and Joel backs into one that holds glass jars containing tennis balls, jacks, marbles, gumballs, and dirt (all of which are labeled). They finally make it to the bedroom, where Molly picks up a vase and hurls it against a wall. The next morning, the camera tracks along a trail of clothing strewn across the floor to find Molly

and Joel fully clothed in the same outfits from the night before, tiredly kissing and in need of water.

Not only does the scene make fun of rom-coms' tendency to relate the amount of disorder caused to the amount of passion expressed in a love scene, but this is accomplished through the use of farcical set dressing and a subverted expectation to cap it off. In the process, it also quickly parodied the shot of messy clothes that is so often shorthand for wild sex in films today. There are countless more examples of parodied plot in *Together*: Joel gets the kick in the pants he needs to win Molly back after speaking with his grandmother who does not even get to finish her story before Joel misinterprets it and uses it to fuel his fire; after Molly leaves a groom at the altar, Joel is the only one who knows where to find her. It is there that Joel and Molly are faced with literally any person or past issue that threatens to keep them apart. One by one, they are defeated, dismissed, or resolved in front of a cheering crowd of would-be wedding guests.

The final parody of plot ties the entire film together in a neat parodic bow that undercuts typical rom-com themes. By the end of the film, Joel and Molly are married, Joel has opened his dream coffee shop, and we are back where we started – at dinner with Karen and Kyle. Joel reminds us again that it was “like a corny romantic comedy” before Kyle asks why Molly and Joel are getting a divorce, an undisclosed fact until this point. As it turns out, Joel's coffee shop had to close, Molly's store followed suit, they were drowning in debt, Molly started a pill addiction, and she eventually started sleeping with her ex. So the two made the mature decision that they “were better off as friends than spouses.” It is rare that a romantic comedy give in to this much post-nuptial realism, and

Together really does momentarily stop in its tracks. There is no undercurrent of hilarity as these lines are delivered. Wain and Showalter took the past eighty minutes' worth of parody on the genre to poke a giant hole in the fantasy lives that romantic comedies purport. Romantic comedies end with emotional scenes of reconnection, like with "You had me at hello" and a new family walking off into the sunset in *Jerry Maguire* (Crowe 1996). Romantic comedies do not end with mature, pragmatic decisions about mutual well-being. In a typical romantic comedy that crafts a fairy tale world with hollow but desirable leading characters, impossibly furnished apartments, all the free time one could have, and a cocksure confidence in true love, there is no room for realism. *They Came Together* digs through every trope and Aristotelian element to deflate this theme that is in support of instinctual, easy, perfect love.

At the end of the film, Kyle confesses to Karen that Molly and Joel's story has made him realize he wants to leave the marriage. Although he clearly means what he says, Karen insists it is a joke, and Kyle nervously laughs it off as if it was. Unprompted, Joel asks Molly if they "should give it another shot," and she responds with a cavalier, "Why not?" With the stereotypical happy ending played to the extreme, the film closes. Even in its final moments after successfully undermining their film with a moment of slight realism, Wain and Showalter could not divorce the film from its true nature of parody.

“DO YOU THINK THIS SCENE SHOULD HAVE BEEN CUT?” – PARODYING PLOT THROUGH HISTORY IN *MONTY PYTHON AND THE HOLY GRAIL*

Monty Python and the Holy Grail does not parody all of Aristotle’s elements in to the same exhaustive extent that *They Came Together* does, but it has an equally metacinematic goal of criticizing and deriving comedy by exposing the artifice of film. *Grail* has a specific focus on the plot of the film – both fabula and syuzhet. Starting with the opening credits supplemented with farcical Swedish subtitles, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* seeks to parody fabled and heroic depictions of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table all the way through its anachronistic conclusion.

In doing so, *Grail* covers a fair amount of ground in regards to parodying Aristotle’s elements. It parodies melody with Sir Robin’s minstrels playing songs that highlight his lack of courage. When the whole gang approaches Camelot together and begin to marvel at its majesty, Patsy (Terry Gilliam) remarks, “It’s only a model,” in a moment of metacinematic self-awareness that parodies the cost-effectiveness of film spectacle. The characters on display, who would usually be portrayed with extreme amounts of intelligence and bravery, are shown as full of ego, foolishness, and general incompetence. Perhaps it is the film’s extensive use of farcical humor that prevents the strong relationships between each parodied element as seen in *They Came Together*, but it is more likely that *Grail*’s relentless and singular focus on parodying plot in all its aspects is what sets it apart from the other elements.

Parodying plot is natural for a film that toys so much with such a popular story. In parodying the Arthurian legend, Monty Python degrades the nobility of the quest for the Holy Grail. Instead of facing classically challenging obstacles or formidable opponents,

King Arthur (Graham Chapman) fights a deluded Black Knight; Sir Galahad's (Michael Palin) biggest threat is a group of sexually eager teenage women; Sir Lancelot (John Cleese) invades a helpless wedding, killing a mix of guards and guests. True to their sketch comedy roots, these scenes and others like them that make up the bulk of the middle of the film contribute very little to moving the story forward. Somehow, the gang ends up together for the final ridiculous plot points, including the Killer Bunny Rabbit of Caerbannog and the police raid that closes the film.

These fabula ingredients make for an obvious parody, putting a spin on the celebrated image of King Arthur. The Arthurian Legend is an especially appropriate target for Python's strategy, as its historicity is hotly debated and so much of the popular conception of King Arthur has been left to works of fiction in film, theatre, and literature. Who is to say that Monty Python's depiction of King Arthur and his knights is any less valid than, say, T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*? Using this fabula of exaggerated hysteria is the smaller half of the film's work to parody plot.

The lion's share belongs to the film's parody of syuzhet. As mentioned earlier, the film starts with a famously hilarious credit sequence that features a letter signed by Richard M. Nixon, Swedish subtitles hijacking the credits themselves, until everybody is "sacked," and the credits end up having to be "completed in an entirely different style at great expense and at the last minute." From the immediate outset, Monty Python wants the audience to see the screenwriters at work. The entire film exposes the artifice through similar techniques but different avenues.

After Sir Bedevere (Terry Jones) joins King Arthur, we are introduced to The Book of the Film. As a female hand turns the pages, a male voice is heard describing the knights that Arthur and Bedevere went on to acquire. After the introduction of “Sir Not-Appearing-In-This-Film,” the female hand is overtaken by a gorilla’s. Already, the number of figures that could be potentially labeled as a “narrator” has become difficult to manage. To clarify, when I consider an entity as a narrator for this film, it is a character or entity that could – in some way – perceivably control the speed, content, or shape of the story.

The group of narrators essentially never stops evolving. About thirty minutes into the film, we are introduced to “A Famous Historian” who is recapitulating the recent events of the film directly to the camera as if he were making a separate film that treated the events of *Grail* as history from a modern perspective. The metacinematic implications are obvious, but the narration conundrum does not stop there. In a late animated sequence, a large monster chases our heroes until the Animator (Terry Gilliam) suffers “a fatal heart attack.” We see him die in a quick cut to his studio and the animated monster is no longer a threat. Here, we see Python directly acknowledging the effect that the challenges of the real world could have on the creative product. Seconds later, the awareness of the narrators’ world bleeds into the consciousness of Arthur as he recognizes “the old man from Scene 24.”

Scene 24 perfectly summarizes the seemingly illogical use of narrative. The male voiceover that has been narrating the film embarks on a tangent about swallows until a group of characters (that will later be revealed) scream “Get on with it!” and the voice

snaps to attention. He begins to describe what he and The Book of the Film call “Scene 24” until he begins to talk about swallows again. Then, right before Scene 24 begins, we can hear the narrator produce a guttural noise as if he has been killed. This is later confirmed when a new male voice is heard narrating in voiceover for the remainder of the film. The classic metatextual tension between the fiction of the text and the outside world is on full display here, as the characters screaming “Get on with it!” (which is not a one-time occurrence) are shown to interact with the narrator, prompting the continuance of the story. As a parody, the moment is played for laughs, but it also serves to redistribute normal storytelling agency from narrators to characters who are undistinguishable and have yet to be introduced.



Figure 2: The gorilla’s hand opening The Book of the Film to “Scene 24.”

This is clearly a challenge to authority, which is a common thread throughout the film. In an early scene with Dennis the Peasant (Michael Palin), King Arthur is reduced to violence against him as he is so frustrated with his superior arguments and reasoning against the monarchy. Common French soldiers are twice shown disrespecting Arthur and his company from literal higher grounds. Immediately before meeting the animated monster, Arthur and company encounter cave writing by Joseph of Arimathea, an early Christian figure heavily associated with the legend of the Holy Grail. The engraving says that the Holy Grail can be found “in the Castle of Aaaaarrrrrrggghhh...” The characters stand around, debating if “Aaaaarrrrrrggghhh” is the name of the castle or if Joseph died while engraving the wall. Perhaps, then, he was dictating, and his engraver did not realize that Joseph was dying until after he finished engraving “Aaaaarrrrrrggghhh.”

The discussion is cut short by the arrival of the cartoon monster, but Monty Python has finished making their point. This scene shows the many ways that historical records can be interpreted or, more likely, misinterpreted. Their entire film has been subverting authority and authorship through unflattering depictions of heroic figures and purposefully muddled roles for narrating figures. Beyond all the comedy jam-packed into *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, the six writer-actors have managed to tailor an argument supporting the impossibility of film as a medium for truth. Even though they did not attempt to put forth a terribly believable version of Arthurian Legend, they made clear that storytelling is a complex enterprise, prone to all sorts of breakdowns and missteps.

**“I THINK I’M DOIN’ OKAY FOR A 15-YEAR-OLD WITH A WIFE AND A BABY.” –
PARODYING MUSIC AND THE MUSICAL IN *WALK HARD: THE DEWEY COX STORY***

Jake Kasdan’s 2007 musical spoof *Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story* came out after a small resurgence in the musical biopic tradition heralded by such films as *Ray* (Hackford 2004) and *Walk the Line* (Mangold 2005). Both films received critical praise and multiple Academy Award nominations, including *Ray*’s Best Picture nod and Best Actor win for Jamie Foxx and a Best Actress win for Reese Witherspoon as June Carter Cash in *Walk the Line*. These films serve as the collective basis for the major plot points of *Walk Hard* and are appropriately exaggerated. The early structure of the film echoes *Walk the Line*’s flashback setup, where the protagonist reminisces about his early life before a big performance. *Walk Hard* plays this up, as Dewey’s (John C. Reilly) drummer, Sam (Tim Meadows) explains, “Dewey Cox needs to think about his entire life before he plays.” We are escorted back to Springberry, Alabama, 1946, on the day Dewey’s musical prodigy of a brother dies at Dewey’s hand in a freak machete accident, “halving” him. In *Walk the Line*, Johnny’s brother dies in a table saw accident, although Johnny has nothing to do with it. As I asserted in the introduction, intertextuality does not equal metatextuality. In the childhood flashback of *Walk Hard*, Dewey and his brother, Nate, are off to have “the best day ever.” Nate predicts that “[a]in’t nothin’ horrible gonna happen today” right before the two are seen walking down their country road. Nate talks about his grand plans for his future, confident that “there’s nothin’ [he] won’t do in this long, long life of [his].” We see a montage of ludicrously dangerous activities before the fatal “halving” of Nate. The distinct similarities between the opening sequences of *Walk Hard* and *Walk the Line* do not form the basis for the metacinematic quality of *Walk*

Hard. Nate's lines that point to the script's self-awareness of the impending doom is what elevates the sequence from inter- to metatextual. Also, movies have the tendency to lull viewers into a false sense of security by overselling a safe tone before a tragedy, like in *The Vow* (Sucsy 2012) where tragedy strikes a married couple after a night of romance comes to a literal screeching halt when a car accident leaves the wife in a server state of amnesia. This drastic change of tone that is so often common in plots that is parodied gives *Walk Hard* its metacinematic flair early on.

The film borrows situations from *Ray* for even more intense parody of plot. In the film of the life of Ray Charles, a young Ray begins to go blind after seeing his brother drown. In *Walk Hard*, Dewey loses his sense of smell immediately after a doctor declares Nate to be dead. In *Ray*, Charles' blindness is attributed to a medical cause, but with its onset so close (nine months, according to the film) to his brother's death, *Walk Hard* took the next (il)logical steps and connected the disability to the death and made the disability almost negligible. The film plays up his "smell blindness" as a serious disadvantage when his mother (Margo Martindale) voices her pride for Dewey having learned how to play the guitar "without even having a sense of smell." Cox assures her, "It's all right now, Mama. I learned how to play by ear." Again, the intertextual connection is not what makes this moment metacinematic. It is a parodic take on the genre convention of a disability that follows tragedy that expresses a self-awareness captured in the film's ironic tone.

Walk Hard gets a lot of mileage out of these kinds of connections and jokes, parodying figures besides Cash and Charles, such as Bob Dylan in explicit *Don't Look*

Back (Pennebaker 1967) fashion, or The Beatles by including parodic version of all four members in the film itself. This element of parody – direct allusions to previous films in a genre – is a popular one and can be found in to great extent in the *Scary Movie* franchise or in more concentrated form in *Spaceballs* (Brooks 1987).



Figure 3: *Walk Hard* emulating the look of Pennebaker's *Don't Look Back*

Walk Hard hits the major musical biopic high notes – extreme drug use, infidelity, creative reinvention, etc. – but the most striking parodic element of the film is the music itself. Quality music is naturally a huge part of any musical biopic, but the music of *Walk Hard* is surprisingly good. One might expect that a parody – where the jokes derive their humor from being unbelievably extreme in one form or another – would not produce songs that would live up to the fictional legend of its main character. It easily could have been a running joke that Cox's songs were bad because the film's creative team did not

need the songs to be good for the film to be funny and it would have certainly added to the metacinematic layers of the film. But director/co-writer, Jake Kasdan, producer/co-writer Judd Apatow, John C. Reilly, and a large team of songwriters went the opposite direction. The songs live up to the production and musical pedigree that the audience is led to believe Dewey Cox would have had. In a DVD feature on the film's music, Judd Apatow describes the music best: "These sounded like songs that could be hits, but they're all slightly off and slightly wrong. But it's still kind of great-sounding music." This "slightly off and slightly wrong" aspect that Apatow references is the lyrics of their songs.

The title track exemplifies this trait. People do not say, "I walk hard," or even, "I am a hard walker." It simply sounds askew. But the majority of the song is noticeably impressive for a parody film, with a punchy beat and a pronounced lead guitar winding in the background, and the whole song perfectly echoes the early rockabilly sound that preceded true rock 'n' roll. When Dewey starts doing cocaine and immediately thereafter starts experimenting with punk music, "Walk Hard" translates surprisingly well into the rollicking tempo and distorted delivery of the genre. The song even easily tackles disco when Dewey struggles to remain relevant as a 1970s variety show host.

The rest of the film's soundtrack is just as diverse. It accurately mimics rhythm and blues, love ballads, mariachi, protest music, folk, early Bob Dylan, psychedelic rock, and blues. There is even a rap song that samples the original version of "Walk Hard" that, in the film, is part of the catalyst for Dewey's final return to the world of music in modern times. In fact, the list of musical genres above is partially generated because the

film does what is expected of musical biopics – as well as biopics in general – and escorts the protagonist through an entire career. While struggling to keep up with the times, Dewey Cox dabbles in all sorts of genres, producing the film's eclectic sound. This is part of the parody of melody in the film: Dewey is such a towering figure in music history that he leaves his stamp on nearly every genre imaginable. Johnny Cash and Ray Charles stayed relatively close to home when it came to venturing out into new musical genres, but Dewey Cox surpassed even The Beatles and The Beach Boys in their musical experimentation. In fact, the film's songwriting crews produced so many songs that they could not fit all of them into the film itself.

Having so many original songs proved to be a parodic advantage. Throughout the film, songs often directly reflect Dewey's state of mind or life struggles in a parodic way. The most over-the-top use of music parodies the Johnny Cash/June Carter duets from *Walk the Line* in a song called "Let's Duet." *Walk the Line* does not make use of montages in the way that *Walk Hard* does, but the onstage sexual tension between the soon-to-be lovers is apparent. In *Walk Hard*, "Let's Duet" features sexual innuendo after sexual innuendo. The title is sung with a lilt to bring out the similar sound of "Let's Do It" and there are pregnant pauses in nearly every line of the song to make the sexuality of the lyrics obvious ("You and I could go down...in history," and so on). The song backs a montage of various activities made explicitly erotic by Dewey and Darlene (Jenna Fischer), such as slowly eating ice cream cones or some very enthusiastic woodworking.

After Dewey accidentally "halves" his father, he returns to his California beach house to appropriately destroy his belongings in a rage, all while the song "Weeping on

the Inside” plays over the scene. After Dewey accidentally “halves” his brother, he discovers his musical talent as a seven-year-old and plays a fully realized blues song, “Cut My Brother In Half Blues.” These on-the-nose moments – and many more – put music at the forefront of the film’s storytelling and draw attention to the exaggerated elements in the lyrical choices, the genres, and even a goat’s voice in one case, parodying Brian Wilson’s brilliant work on *Pet Sounds*.

By taking such care in crafting quality songs with “slightly wrong” bits and pieces, the filmmakers of *Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story* capture metacinema in melody. The truthful, honest elements of the music that are infused with the hyperbolized and farcical lyrics exemplify typical metatextual tension of the real and the fictional. The music itself – in its tone, execution, production quality, melody, and highly committed performances – feels believable as the product of a popular musical icon. But lyrics such as “Flowers Everywhere/Children Cry/Guitar on the ground/God himself asks why” in the soft, sweeping, and surprisingly touching lament, “(Have You Heard the News) Dewey Cox Died” invite a raised eyebrow, but it is these executions of perfect tension by which *Walk Hard* tackles the unenviable task of mastering parodic metacinema in three-minute long sound bites.

“THEY LOSE ME RIGHT AFTER THE BUNKER SCENE.”- PARODYING SPECTACLE IN *BLAZING SADDLES*

Mel Brooks is such a titan in the field of parody that Gehring’s book is practically organized around him. Not only does it feature a whole chapter (one of five) on Brooks himself, but it also qualifies the chapter prior to this one as “Pre-Brooks,” as if Brooks is to

parody as Jesus of Nazareth is to the Judeo-Christian world and thus serves as a perfect split in marking time. This messianic stature is entirely earned: much of Brooks' filmography is a veritable "Greatest Hits" of parody. He released *Blazing Saddles* in 1974, the same year as another very highly regarded parody of his, *Young Frankenstein*. Suffice it to say, Mel Brooks is still perhaps the most recognizable figure in parody.

Blazing Saddles, one of his earlier pictures, did a lot to establish his respected standing. It simultaneously displays a love and irreverence for the Western, as all parodies should for their respective subjects. But here, the love is from a deep place of knowledge. A year after the film's release, Will Wright published a book entitled *Six Guns & Society: A Structural Study of the Western* in which he enumerates the four basic stories that classical westerns tell as he sees them: the Classical Plot, the Vengeance Variation, the Transition Theme, and the Professional Plot. Somehow, Brooks and his four fellow writers shoehorned three of those types of Western into *Saddles*.

Without spending too much time enumerating all the details in each variant, I will try to give an impression of how Brooks and company incorporate them. *Saddles*' lead protagonist, Bart (Cleavon Little) is "unknown to the society" that he enters. The society does not accept him as their sheriff (his "special status") because he is black, but they learn to accept him as he helps to lead them to victory over their villains (Slim Pickens as Taggart and Harvey Corman as Hedley Lamarr) before he ultimately "gives up his special status" and leaves town (Wright 48-9). All these characteristics come from the Classical Plot. Gene Wilder's Jim the Waco Kid is Bart's partner and fulfills a key aspect of the classical plot that Bart does not: Jim has a "special ability" as the fastest gunman in

the world. Wright uses the term “special ability” in every plot type, so it is crucial that Jim fulfill this requirement. The transition theme, which Wright describes as “almost a direct inversion of the classical plot,” is also fulfilled by Jim because it requires that the hero be a part of the society at the start of the picture (Jim is the town drunk). From there, the hero must fight against society, which Bart and Jim do at first, as they must counteract their extreme racist hatred of Bart. This is accomplished in part when Jim advises Bart on how to defeat the henchman Mongo (Alex Karras). Bart eventually devises a clever anachronistic plan to do so, and wins them over, pushing them into the professional plot. Here, Wright makes a point to establish a group of heroes, rather than a single one, that fights the good fight. Bart and Jim take on the task of defending a defenseless society and they “form a group for the job” by bringing in Bart’s mates from the railroad construction, and together they and the townspeople “defeat the villains” (113). It is worth noting that although the vengeance variation is not included in *Blazing Saddles* in an obvious way, one could argue that because the Taggart was a former and cruel boss to Bart and they had conflicts separate from the driving one of the film that there is an element of revenge to the film, but this is too flimsy a case to make in earnest.

From this rich understanding of the Western, Brooks fashioned a parody that covers all six elements. As far as parody of plot goes, the amalgamation of plots described above makes for an overloaded story. Casting Slim Pickens, a noted star of Westerns, in a parody of Westerns is the tip of the iceberg in the parody of character. Thematically, the film comically and anachronistically addresses racial acceptance in the tense environment of 1874 and the race issue is also a factor in some of the parody of

diction, as Bart knowingly leans into African-American stereotypes around white people to gain favor and speaks normally and sometimes in a contemporary fashion with Jim. For melody, the standard Western theme song is produced as well as a secondary narrative song that turns out to be a diegetic church hymn, toying with the knowing inclusion of self-conscious construction.



Figure 4: The literal breakdown of the fourth wall.

But the parody of spectacle is the real star of *Blazing Saddles*. The film is famous for its outrageous path to conclusion, via action filmed all over the Hollywood Warner Brothers lot. The climactic brawl breaks through a practically literal fourth wall into a live set for what seems to be a musical that could easily be filmed at any time from the early 1930s until the present day. Dom DeLuise's enraged director, Buddy Bizarre, attempts to stop the madness, but Taggart punches him in the gut, saying, "Piss on you! I'm workin' for Mel Brooks!" Already, the line between the fiction of the story and the

supposedly objective reality outside of it has been obliterated. If these characters from *Saddles* are aware that they are being employed by a film auteur from 1974, why does this plot continue to evolve? It does so with great haste, as the characters move on to fight in the studio's cafeteria, which introduces characters from every conceivable film set. The rumpus pours into the streets of Los Angeles, and Hedley jumps into a taxi, asking to be driven "off this picture." Bart is in hot pursuit on horseback all the way to a showing of *Blazing Saddles* at Grauman's Chinese Theatre. It is there that Hedley learns that Bart has found when he sees Bart arrive at Grauman's in the film itself. Bart and Hedley have a showdown, and Hedley is vanquished. As a reward of sorts, Jim and Bart go back into the theatre to check out the end of the film, bringing us back onto firm ground (or as firm as it was before).

Such a Möbius strip of a sequence requires little defense of its metacinematic quality, but a fair amount of explanation as to *why* it is metacinematic. It is immediately obvious that Brooks crammed the fictional story and the relative reality beyond into one moment, directly acknowledging the constructed nature of his story. But the consistent devotion the characters have to *their* reality within 1974 Los Angeles is a big part of what makes the sequence so funny and so rewarding. The visual evidence (spectacle) the film presents indicates that *Blazing Saddles* is aware that it is a movie and nothing more, and the characters agree – up to a certain point. Lamarr knows he is in a movie and asks to be driven off of it, but he is well aware that there is no escaping it. In his final moments with Bart, there is no effort on his part to convince Bart that they live in a world of fiction and that his life should be spared because they are just actors playing parts or anything along

those lines. He fights on the fictional premises as previously established to his very death. When the film resumes its normal presentation for the resolution and Jim has a tub of popcorn from the movie theatre, there is no mention of anything about their time in the outside world, so to speak.

The film is dedicated to preserving a sense of separation between these two disparate worlds. This parody of spectacle can be as simple as an elongated gag played for laughs: on some level, it probably is. But the conflicting visual cues in these final sequences bring to a head the competing metacinematic forces of the constructed and the real. By literally destroying the constructed elements of filmmaking (the sets), Brooks is creating a visual metaphor for the act of parody. Parody is meant to tear down the walls, to peek behind the curtain, and to lay bare the truth of construction, as any piece of metacinema should. But parody has the distinct advantage of getting to do it with gleeful abandon.

“FOR A MOMENT THERE I THOUGHT WE WERE IN TROUBLE.” – PARODY OF REAFFIRMATION IN *BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID*

Wes Gehring admits that “parodies of reaffirmation,” as he calls them, “are not so obvious” (7). The most concise description says they exhibit “a fascinating tension between genre expectations...and a parody that is comic without deflating the characters involved” (7). At first glance, they may seem more revisionist or neo-genre than anything else and hardly metacinematic. But upon closer examination of one of his key examples, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (Hill 1969), the nuance that Gehring implies when he labels a film a reaffirmation parody is clear.

Before diving into our discussion of *Butch*, it is necessary to shore up this understanding of reaffirmation. Some other examples that Gehring provides for this type are *Bonnie and Clyde* (Penn 1967) and *An American Werewolf in London* (Landis 1981). In his book *Studying Hot Fuzz*, Neil Archer directly references Gehring's concept and submits Edgar Wright's buddy cop comedy *Hot Fuzz* (2007) as a reaffirmation parody, as well as Wright's earlier zombie flick, *Shaun of the Dead* (2004). I would also submit the more recent *Guardians of the Galaxy* (Gunn 2014) as a reaffirmation parody of superhero movies. All of these films, as per Gehring's conception of reaffirmation, have "a poignancy not normally associated with parody" (7). All together, these are films that oscillate between genre and comedy that subvert the genre until a final "reaffirmation of the subject under attack" (Gehring 6). This is not an exact pattern of "comedy-genre-comedy-genre-comedy-genre ending," but more a suggested ratio. Reaffirmation parodies never dip too far in favor of either side until the ending. The zombie battle scene in *Shaun of the Dead* cheekily set to Queen's "Don't Stop Me Now" plays like a choreographed number and downplays the peril of the many brain-hungry undead lurking outside the pub. This is quickly countered with the reveal that Shaun's dear mother has been bit. This leads to an emotional high point of the film wherein Shaun is responsible for shooting his undead mother.

This roller coaster is typical of reaffirmation parodies and can be found in spades in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. The scenes following the opening credits – which will be discussed later – are framed very tightly and in sepia tone. Butch (Paul Newman) is watching a heavily guarded bank close down and Sundance (Robert

Redford) is in the midst of a heated card game. Banks and blackjack: two Western fixtures are left almost untouched. Butch barely speaks to the guard at the bank and Sundance ends up almost starting a shootout over an accusation of cheating. The tight framing and sepia color of these scenes hide some wry humor and subtle genre subversion. Screenwriter William Goldman refers to Butch's "smart-assness" in his introduction as part of a scene where there is not "much unusual" going on (199). But Goldman says the second scene that introduces Sundance has some "strange terrain" (200). Sundance's adversary – Macon (Donnelly Rhodes) – is "written as a hero: big, rugged, powerful" (Goldman 200). This is the first genre subversion, as he turns out to be a scared boy of a man when he (and the audience) find out who Sundance is and the deadly accuracy of which he is capable with a gun. This inversion is captured with Butch's constant attempts at humor in response to the Kid's ironic request: "If he invites us to stay, then we'll go." As Goldman says, if *Butch* were "a John Wayne movie," soon we would see "Wayne...pick up the card table and clobber the enemy" (200). Instead, the only gunplay is a simple show of Sundance's talent as he and Butch leave the saloon, and all harm is avoided. Of course, with Butch's constant humorous interjections and his final line in the scene ("Like I been tellin' you: over the hill."), the film's reaffirmative parody has begun to reveal itself.

As the men head back to Hole in the Wall to reunite with their gang, the images turn to full color and the film itself begins to change. Butch and Sundance are jovial with one another, teasing and bickering like the old friends they are. The reaffirmative parody really begins to take hold when they arrive at Hole in the Wall and a hulking Harvey (Ted

Cassidy) challenges Butch for leadership of the gang. Unlike most Western heroes, Butch is slow to violence and eager to make peace, but when this option proves unviable, he decides to fight Harvey. Ever the clever one, Butch says they cannot start the fight until they “get the rules straightened out.” When Harvey yells about there being “no rules” in a knife fight, Butch gives him a swift kick to the groin and calls for someone to give a “1, 2, 3, Go” for the fight to begin. Sundance calls it back right away and Butch is already in motion, throwing his weight behind his clasped hands and into Harvey’s face, knocking him out.

This brief set of exchanges plays like a house on fire, with the speed and rhythm of a comedy routine. In a standard Western, the scene would have been more likely to unfold with extreme violence and the death of Harvey. In fact, both Harvey and Butch make mention of the fact that the other could or will end up dead. But Harvey is not even punished as he is seen in the following train robbing (Harvey’s idea), in which the oscillation continues, parodying *The Great Train Robbery* (Porter 1903). The gang masterfully takes over a train only to end up in screwballish back and forth with Woodcock (George Furth, who also plays in *Blazing Saddles*), the safe guard, eventually blowing his train car door to smithereens. The oscillations can also occur within the same scene. After this train robbery, a local sheriff (Kenneth Mars, another Brooks collaborator) speaks to what is seemingly a random gathering of townspeople as he tries to gather a posse. His soliciting becomes more impassioned, until he climaxes with, “Am I right?! Well? What do you say?!” His only response comes from a man who soon

reveals himself to be a bicycle peddler taking advantage of the already gathered crowd in order to sell what he calls “the future” in a comical button to the scene.

Gehring is right to make known that these parodies are more subtle and nuanced. *Butch* boasts expert period detail and production value. There is nothing cheaply self-referential about the film in the same way that we saw in *Blazing Saddles* or even the less extreme case of *Walk Hard*. Where *Walk Hard* made extra efforts to periodize their costumes with all of Dewey’s band wearing sherwanis and other classical Indian outfits during the scenes set in the 1970s, *Butch Cassidy* makes the turn of the century fashions feel as varied and lived-in as we would imagine them to be at the time. There are few – if any – stereotypical cowboy hats like in *Blazing Saddles*, as most characters wear bowlers or fedoras as was customary of the time and reflected in the famous portrait of Butch, Sundance, and some of their gang.

The picture is ostensibly a Western and nothing more. But with Gehring’s analytics in hand, one’s understanding of the film opens up. William Goldman, the screenwriter who won an Oscar for this film, began his obsession with the material after discovering how unlike a typical Western criminal Butch Cassidy was in real life:

Here was this incredibly charming man, uncatchable (he just rode into farmhouses and said, “Hello, my name is Butch Cassidy, the law’s on my tail, mind if I hide in your basement?” and they’d say, “Sure.”...People *adored* Cassidy; he was just that amiable...Couple that fact with his job as head of the biggest most successful gang in western history and he wasn’t

good at any of the things gang members were good at; well, I think that's interesting. (qtd. in Gehring 7).

Cassidy was the perfect basis for a reaffirmation parody: he was kind, charming, incapable, respectful, and avoided violence when at all possible. Perhaps it is this basis in actuality that helps *Butch* to feel almost entirely unlike a parody of any kind. There is so much earnestness in the picture that the comedic anti-genre parts feel true to life rather than false to fiction. This stands in direct contrast to the comedy in overt parodies where it is used to convey a blatant fictionality.

Goldman took a true-to-life characterization of his main character that could have easily been styled to register as overt parody and surrounded it with rich detail and sincere character motivation in order to properly include his story in a genre that ironically played against it. Therein lies the metacinematic quality of it all. Reaffirmation parodies expose the inner workings and clichés of genres by dancing around them. *Butch* provides another strong example of this oscillation late in the film after the boys have relocated to Bolivia with Etta (Katharine Ross) and decide to go straight, eventually getting jobs as escorts to guard the payrolls that they recently decided to stop stealing. Their new employer, Percy (Strother Martin), is an oddball and provides more explicit comedic relief than any other character. In the short time the boys work for him, comedy abounds, especially when Butch and Sundance must hide their faces when picking up a payroll with Percy because they “hit this place in June.” On the return trip, Percy is mid-rant when he is shot dead by hidden bandits. Trapped and in danger, Butch and Sundance give up the payroll, only to return to recover the funds. The tone is decidedly less gleeful,

despite Butch's sheepish confession to never having "shot anybody before." They end up gunning down all six men in the film's only use of slow motion. These are the only people Butch and Sundance have shot at, not to mention killed, in the film thus far. The remorse registers on their faces right away and Butch is uncharacteristically silent through the rest of the scene and the next one.

The irony is two-fold: first, Butch – a man wanted by the highest authorities for extreme crimes – had never shot any one up to that point. Second, most of the violence we have witnessed that was committed by either man occurred *after* they gave up a life of crime. These depictions are hardly typical of any Western criminal, protagonist or not. Again, we see the comedy-genre back-and-forth at work as it creates clear distinctions between the two in order to make the genre reaffirming moments all the more potent. This also highlights the comedic moments that undercut the genre. In this side-by-side example of Percy's death, it is easier to understand what makes a film like *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* metacinematic. The genre moments play like a harsh return to reality from the light and breezy comedic moments that precede them.

In *Butch's* case, the denial of reality is actually a part of the comedy. In the final scene, Butch and Sundance are cornered in a room adjacent to a plaza that is surrounded by militia, and they are both severely wounded. Instead of speaking about their plan to try to get out of this, or saying goodbyes and coming to terms with their dire, deadly circumstances, Butch pitches Sundance on his next big destination: Australia. They go back and forth about how fantastic Australia could be before even addressing their situation. Butch asks if Sundance had seen Lefors, their main pursuer. Sundance had not,

and a relieved Butch replies, “Oh good. For a moment there I thought we were in trouble.”

This diegetic denial of reality signifies the metacinematic qualities that are specific to *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. When Sundance coarsely invites Etta to join them on their escape to South America, Etta replies with appropriate aplomb, making it clear that this actually is her best course of action. She promises to be a good, cooperative, and helpful companion, but she cites one caveat: “I won’t watch you die. I’ll miss that scene if you don’t mind.” Not only does Etta stay true to her word and leave before they die, but the film denies its audience that scene as well. When Butch and Sundance run into the plaza, guns blazing, the film famously freeze-frames on our heroes before the first volley of shots is fired on them. Etta’s prediction for herself became an operating principle for the film.

There are also a series of more obvious metacinematic instances that play with the tendencies of silent cinema, as the art form was sweeping the world during the time in which the film is set. *Butch* has four sequences that are easily read as metacinematic in this way. First is the well-known bicycle show that Butch puts on for Etta, which feels vaudevillian in its camp treatment of the subject matter. Then there is a montage of still images in rusty black-and-white that plays almost like a newsreel as we track Butch, Sundance, and Etta to the East Coast and Coney Island all the way down to South America. Their first “South American Getaway” (as it is described on the soundtrack) plays under a frothy vocal arrangement of “bahs,” “bees,” and other unintelligible syllables as accompanied by drums. All the above examples play with no diegetic sound,

just the music on the soundtrack, emphasizing their closeness to the tradition of silent film.

The most obvious use of this style comes in a scene that plays over the rest of “South American Getaway,” including its more somber minutes. Etta and Sundance enter a bank, posing as potential customers engaged in what seems to be a heated disagreement about whether or not the bank is secure enough to store Etta’s precious valuables. The manager ends up leading them down to their safe, all the while bragging about how secure the bank’s doors, barred gates, and safe is with great showmanship. They pull a gun on him, take the money, and lock him in the safe’s gated area. Part of the reason it is so obvious in contrast to the other scenes is because of the large amount of expository dialogue is jettisoned, whereas the rest of the “South American Getaway” montage plays over more action-oriented scenes punctuated only by explosions or gunshots. Also, the manager’s flamboyance recalls the pantomimic style of acting employed in silent films with faces and bodies as the only tools actors had to express themselves.

Then there is the matter of the opening credits. After the 20th Century Fox Logo plays in sepia, we hear film sputtering through a projector and see the corresponding frames flickering in the left hand of the screen at an inward angle. The intertitle reads, “The Hole in the Wall Gang, led by Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, are all dead now...but once they ruled the West!” What follows is a brief silent film showing even more fictionalized versions of Butch, Sundance, and their gang as they cover their faces with bandanas and ride to violently rob the Union Pacific train, taking from individual passengers and shooting at lawmen. It feels very much like *The Great Train Robbery* for

obvious reasons, but it is more important to think about the silent film in relation to *Butch* itself. The film actually comes from a deleted scene where Butch, Sundance, and Etta catch the film as they are leaving a theatre to put Etta on a train head back to the United States. Butch and Sundance are so offended by their nasty portrayals that they do not notice Etta slip out without saying goodbye. Unfortunately, the film never included this scene at any point and to evaluate the silent short on those terms is fruitless. But it does help to establish how purposefully fictional the short was made to appear. These opening credits are followed by a brief title card that reads “Most of what follows is true.” This is enough to establish the dichotomy between the absolute genre indulgence seen in the silent short and the earnest undercutting in the film itself.



Figure 5: The opening credits to the right of the fictionalized silent film.

Understanding *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* as a parody of affirmation instead of a straight Western or even a revisionist Western helps to elucidate the film's extreme self-awareness within the genre. Too often the film plays with film or filmic convention, or bucks the very genre it so lovingly embraces for it to not be read as metacinematic in its highly unique way. Parodies of reaffirmation may not read like any other type of metacinema – parodic or not – but they are undoubtedly working to heighten an awareness of genre, just like overt parodies.

CONCLUDING PARODY

Wes Gehring's key characteristics of parody – notably the ones that point us to its “distorted imitation of a familiar genre or auteur” and “self-consciousness about the filmmaking experience” (16) – help cultivate the understanding that parody is a humorous, reflexive deconstruction of filmic tropes. By exposing these tropes, parodies make light of and reverse their target genres' regular attempts to obscure the artifice of filmmaking. And where else can tropes be found but in the elements that make up storytelling? Aristotle's dramatic building blocks are the perfect framework to give structure to Gehring's parodic requirements.

Each of the first four films discussed at length here used similar techniques ranging from some as obvious as breaking the fourth wall to some as relatively subtle as a few curious lines in a song. Parodies of reaffirmation employ quieter strategies such as humorously embracing subtle critiques of a genre to isolate the earnest genre moments and draw attention to their genre-ness. All the same, parodies of both kinds are firmly set on deconstructing and exposing genre conventions. Although some films may make

lower blows at their respective genres, each parody is born out of a deep love and understanding for its genre, as it takes a great deal of research of a genre in order to properly plunder it. And by plundering, retooling, exaggerating, undercutting, and playing for laughs, parodies entertain while simultaneously working to educate audiences about the formulas and tropes that may otherwise have gone unnoticed, turning a reflexive metacinematic mirror on themselves to make enjoyable the impossibility of truth in fiction.

Chapter Three: Stories Within Stories

Films about storytelling are easily the most visible and recognizable examples of metacinema. Often, the popular concept of metacinema is limited to films about films. This simplistic view excludes a vast number of films that have every right to be considered metacinema. For instance, *Stranger Than Fiction* (Forster 2006) features Will Ferrell as a man who is living a normal life but somehow is also the main character in a novel that he hears narrating his days. Although the fictional presence within the film is a novel, *Fiction* is metacinematic by virtue of the fact that it is a film that portrays an existential conflict between fiction and reality.

I use the term “existential” to indicate there being a tension with the fiction beyond the fiction’s literal presence in the film. In *Sunset Boulevard*, (Wilder 1950) Norma Desmond’s (Gloria Swanson) delusions bring her to a mental breakdown in which she is unable to tell the difference between the film she believes she is making and the film being taken of her by the press at the close of the film, which becomes part of *Sunset Boulevard* itself. This tension is existential as it raises questions of Desmond’s relative reality, her perception of actual reality, and upon what the nature of her being is based. Compare this with a film like *The Sunshine Boys* (Ross 1975), where the fiction within the film functions like any other part of a story. A famed vaudeville comedy team, Lewis and Clark (George Burns and Walter Matthau) is slated to revive an old bit called the “Doctor Sketch.” The sketch itself is involved in two scenes: they set up for the sketch in Clark’s apartment and we see what is most likely the majority of the sketch during a dress rehearsal that stops short. Nowhere in the film is there any indication that the Doctor

Sketch is in some way related to the men's lives, either symbolically or in a sort of parallel of their relationship. The sketch is simply treated as an event in the script that is rife with conflict: the film never once investigates any difference or similarity between the world of the performed sketch and the real world of the film. For these reasons, *The Sunshine Boys* and films like it should not be considered metacinema: there is no tension between the fiction and the reality as the fiction is handled in a straightforward manner and with no embellishments.

Some films walk a fine line between *Sunset* and *Sunshine*, and I would be inclined to consider those films metacinematic. The recent Coen Brothers love letter to Hollywood's studio days, *Hail, Caesar!* (2016) features numerous scenes that essentially recreate the style and spectacle of classical musicals, Westerns, chamber dramas, and even mermaid pictures. These scenes and the behind-the-scenes scenes that accompany them are fairly straightforward, dealing with the challenges and victories of filmmaking. In these instances, it mirrors *Sunshine Boys*, as Eddie Mannix (Josh Brolin) is visiting these sets as part of his job, or Hobie Doyle (Alden Ehrenreich) is reporting to a set as part of *his* job. However, the same film also features a big recurring argument about the depiction of Jesus of Nazareth in the film that shares the film's title. Some characters do not feel it is proper to see Jesus' face in the film. *Hail, Caesar!* – the one we are watching – does not show the face of the actor who is playing the actor who is playing Jesus in the fictional *Hail, Caesar!* This seeming gag plays into some of the film's broader themes concerning the absence of religiosity in film, the nature of divinity, and so on.

In light of these examples, we can establish a rule for films with internal fictions: simply making a film about fiction does not make a film metacinematic – the internal fiction must have some thematic resonance or distinct parallels with the story of the film itself. Internal fictions, as I will define them for the purposes of this thesis, are stories within films that in some way illumine the central story of the film. The internal fiction may draw distinct parallels with the film’s plot, or it may provoke discussion amongst the characters. An internal fiction could interact with the many storyline in any number of simple or complex ways, but in order to be metacinematic, it must have a relationship that transcends mere diegetic connections.

This interactivity was very much a concern of William Siska in his article “Metacinema: A Modern Necessity” that serves as the guiding text for this chapter. He split metacinema into two types of films: traditional and modern. Siska uses *Sunset Boulevard* as an example of a traditionally reflexive film, saying that the film “is not about Billy Wilder’s production of *Sunset Boulevard*, but about the problems of the characters portrayed within it” (285). This is in contrast with his concept of modernist films where “[r]eflexive elements...are secondarily or not at all directed to ‘films within the film.’ Rather they are brought to bear on the films themselves” (285). This dichotomy of classification will be the broad organizing principle as we move forward in this chapter. When considering films with internal fictions, this is a very notable break between these two types of films. Traditionally reflexive films keep the metacinematic elements contained within the context of the story, whereas modernist metacinematic

films create larger questions that implicate the nature and structure of the film (of even cinema in general) in the proverbial hall of mirrors.

This split in the most obvious form of metacinema is further enriched by the application of the age-old question: Does art reflect life or does life reflect art? This power struggle between life and art – truth and fiction, reality and construct – will have a large bearing on our understanding of metacinema in the next two categories. Although parodies work with similar ideas that highlight the disparity between the highly fabricated product of film and the authentic feeling that films often strive to achieve, films with internal fictions (as well as the performative and dreaming films of the next chapter) capitalize on the tension between art and life to express the self-awareness that makes them metacinematic.

Specifically, the films in this chapter use the inclusions of film, other types of storytelling, or references to those to make an argument in support of either life reflecting art or art reflecting life. Recalling Lionel Abel – whose two central postulates will guide chapter four’s investigations – proves helpful to begin this chapter as well. In “summarizing the values...of metatheatre,” he provides us with some helpful context for understanding why the art/life tension defines metacinema, especially for the category at hand: “Metatheatre assumes there is no world except that created by human striving, human imagination” (113). Here, Abel makes a somewhat contradictory statement that speaks directly to the art/life tension. He asserts that the only reality is the one created by human thought. It is important to note, for metacinema’s sake, that he did not say if the creation of this imagined world is what makes it real or if the real world as it currently

seems to be allows this imagined world to be real. Instead of giving an answer to the metacinematic equivalent of the question, “Which came first, the chicken or the egg?” he makes room for the necessary amount of ambiguity. After all, what reality was there before humans imagined one (in this scenario), or even before humans imagined? This is the discussion that the films of this second category of metacinema will flesh out.

Each of the four films discussed has a distinct position on the life/art tension as is most common with films featuring internal fictions. These opposing positions naturally rise from metacinematic films that employ these modernist and traditional methods as they directly pit fiction and reality – art and life – against each other in very explicit ways. In any given film that fits into this second category of metacinema, the film will have to posit some sort of connection between art and life. This can either be a positive one in which art is so natural and powerful that life mimics it or can be captured in it, or it can be a negative one where art can do nothing more than imitate life and is totally incapable of honestly recreating life in any way. This tension between art and life is quintessentially metacinematic, as metacinema is so utterly concerned with exposing the artificial inner workings of film. All types of metacinema question the role of fiction in film and in life, but in metacinematic films that involve internal fictions, the stories deal with fiction in an earnest, head-on manner that requires the film to take a position on the relationship between art and life. This relationship a requisite inclusion in any metacinema and it is literally impossible for films with internal fictions to avoid making a statement on the matter. Matching both of these approaches with both modernist and traditional approaches forms a quadrant (see Table 1) that guided the selection of films

for this chapter: Traditional/Art Reflects Life, Traditional/Life Reflects Art, Modernist/Art Reflects Life, Modernist/Life Reflects Art. All together, these films cover the wide spectrum of films that employ metacinema through the use of fictions and stories within the film itself.

Table 1: Quadrant of Chapter Three's Films with Internal Fictions

	Traditional	Modernist
Art Reflects Life	<i>The Truman Show</i> (Weir 1998)	<i>Persona</i> (Bergman 1966)
Life Reflects Art	<i>The Red Shoes</i> (Powell, Pressburger 1948)	<i>Close-Up</i> (Kiarostami 1990)

Of all the films discussed in this chapter, *The Truman Show* has the closest relationship with its internal fiction. Although so much of what the film shows is also unfolding in the same way, at the same rate for the audience of the television show *The Truman Show*, the film is entirely against the notion that life is in any way a product of art. Other films that occupy the same spot on the quadrant include: *Tropic Thunder* (Stiller 2008), *Wag the Dog* (Levinson 1997), *Atonement* (Wright 2007), *Barton Fink* (Coen, Coen 1991), *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (Allen 1985), *EdTV* (Howard 1999), and *The Princess Bride* (Reiner 1987).

Conversely, *The Red Shoes* consistently works to show that art and life have undeniable parallels. Furthermore, these parallels are found only after art first expresses whatever event or feeling is then mirrored in the life of the characters. Through the inclusion of a ballet with the same title as the film, *The Red Shoe* floods the lives of its characters with artistic flourishes that match its ballet. Other films that fit the Traditional/Life Reflects Art description include: *Black Swan* (Aronofsky 2010), *An American in Paris* (Minnelli 1951), *The Player* (Altman 1992), *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder 1950), *Synecdoche, New York* (Kaufman 2008), *Stranger Than Fiction* (Forster 2006), *All That Jazz* (Fosse 1979), *Galaxy Quest* (Parisot 1999), and *Sherlock, Jr.* (Keaton 1924).

Persona's modernist approach to internal fictions means that it eschews the inclusion of a fiction in the way that *The Truman Show* or *The Red Shoes* features a recognizable form of storytelling. *Persona* personifies art and life using its two leading ladies to illustrate the impossibility of a harmonious relationship between the two. Other Modernist/Art Reflects Life films include: *A Moment of Innocence* (Makhmalbaf 1996), *My Dinner with Andre* (Malle 1981), and *Pleasantville* (Ross 1998).

Finally, *Close-Up* blends a true story of impersonation and cinephilia with recreations of the story without bothering to make clear which is which. By purposefully jumbling real life and its fictitious retelling, *Close-Up* treats life and art as equals. Other Modernist/Life Reflects Art films include: *8½* (Fellini 1963), *Berberian Sound Studio* (Strickland 2012), *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (Reisz 1981), and *Medium Cool* (Wexler 1969).

“YOU NEVER HAD A CAMERA IN MY HEAD!” – TRADITIONAL/ART REFLECTS LIFE IN *THE TRUMAN SHOW*

The first of the four quadrants we will investigate is traditional metacinema that advocates the reflection of life in art. In the case of Peter Weir’s *The Truman Show* (1998), art and life share a relationship as close as an audience could be expected to believe in a film as highly improbable but equally possible as *Truman* is. Jim Carrey plays the title character, the first human ever adopted by a corporation, who is unwittingly cast as the star of his own reality show that airs without interruption to the entire world.

As per usual with the traditional strand of metacinema, the reflexivity is obvious. There are no opening credits for the film *The Truman Show*: instead we are asked to watch credits for the television show, where the creator and actors who play Truman’s friends and family look into the camera and say things like, “Nothing you see here is fake.” Truman’s wife – Meryl, played by Hannah Gill played by Laura Linney – freely admits that she sees no separation between her life as Meryl or her life outside of the show. The mastermind of Truman’s life – Ed Harris’ Christof – spells out the fiction/reality tension right away, citing actors with “phony emotions” and “pyrotechnics” as a source of boredom for audiences. He sees Truman as the ultimate remedy to entirely fabricated art. He admits that “the world he inhabits is, in some respects, counterfeit,” but says “there’s nothing fake about Truman himself...It isn’t always Shakespeare, but it’s genuine. It’s a life.” Everyone around Truman seems to think that there is no difference between the life they have helped to create for Truman and life itself.

Truman, on the other hand, begins the film entirely unaware of any separation. In an interview with Christof shown later in the film, we learn that Truman has experienced many attempts from people outside of the giant studio that is his hometown of Seahaven to disrupt the illusion and inform him of his plight. Despite these moments and his significant experience with Sylvia (Natascha McElhone) when she told him everything outright, Truman exhibits no suspicion of his manufactured existence and the film shows his growth into total awareness and eventual freedom. The first clue he notices is a Fresnel light that appears to have fallen from the sky. It is labeled “Sirius (9 Canis Majoris),” informing the audience that even the sky in this realm is artificial. Truman is puzzled, but he is dissuaded from wondering any more about the matter when a perfectly timed radio announcement credits the light to an aircraft that started dropping parts.

This is the pattern that emerges: Truman comes across something suspect, and the television show explains it away. Truman notices his father – who was killed off the show when he was still a boy – as a homeless man and Christof reincorporates him into the story using amnesia as an excuse. Truman overhears the radio station that is constantly transmitting his whereabouts, which leads him to act with extreme randomness. He attempts to take an elevator in a building he has never been inside and discovers it is false and actually has a rest area behind it with craft services. The next day, Meryl says she is working a surgery for someone who fell down that very shaft in an attempt to explain the car’s absence. Eventually, the evidence is insurmountable, motivating Truman to claim his freedom.

This pattern is what makes this film part of traditional metacinema. The truth about Truman's existence is continually pushing to make itself known, either through other characters or mishaps such as the falling Fresnel. In doing so, the characters that personify the fiction (essentially everyone besides Sylvia) rail harder against this inevitability. This conflict between fiction and reality is literal and entirely diegetic. The climax of the film takes place at "sea," as Truman has given all his co-stars the slip and made it to a sailboat and is attempting to sail away from the island of Seahaven. Christof discovers this and wages a storm that nearly kills him in the hopes that he will abandon his quest. Truman's resolve stays strong, and he ultimately reaches the end of the sound stage. Christof makes a last-ditch effort to convert Truman to a life of fiction, claiming that there "is no more truth out there than there is in the world [he] created for [Truman]: same lies, the same deceit." Of course, Truman does not fall for such a lie and exits the world with dignity.

Truman's triumph establishes the film's position on art imitating life. All the cracks in the veneer of Seahaven that Truman noticed along the way exhibit an inability for art to create or reproduce life. This is especially obvious when Christof's quest to incite "television's first on-air conception" of a child between Truman and Meryl, or even his next romantic interest. Christof literally tries to create life that is art. He believes that art is more real than life, that life imitating art is in no way false. In fact, as he expresses, "Seahaven is the way the world should be." Seahaven's retro 1940s fashions, white picket fences, and idyllic beach setting all relate to a certain image of the perfect American existence. Christof believes he has created a lifestyle that is more real than life

itself, believing that art *can be* life, perhaps even better than life itself. But Truman's rejection of Christof's falsities shows that *The Truman Show* ultimately believes that art is incapable of constructing a world that would satisfy the deepest and most natural desires within us as Truman exemplifies in wanting to see the world and be spontaneous.

Through Truman (the only True Man), Weir and writer Andrew Niccol argue that art can only imitate life, never accurately recreate it, and that life is something unique unto itself. Weir constantly reminds us that we are indeed watching a movie by taking advantage of his metacinematic storyline and setting. A significant number of the camera angles – if not a simple majority – are such that they are meant to be understood as shots for the television show. These shots are either framed as tight circles and placed in the middle of the action to look like, for instance, a button camera on Truman's shirt, or the corners of the shot are darkened to make the camera look hidden. Since, as we learn in Christof's interview, the show is entirely paid for by product placement and items that are for sale on the show, we occasionally get a line from one of the self-aware characters about how tasty their beer is or how helpful their new cooking tool is. From a metacinematic standpoint, not only does this highlight the fictionality of Truman's world, but it also highlights the fictionality of *The Truman Show* itself. This constant presence of artificiality shows how manufactured Truman's world is while showing how manufactured the film itself is, working on two levels in classic metacinematic fashion.



Figure 6: A shot for the television show from a camera in Truman's car radio.

The subtlest but perhaps also the deepest-seeded element of metacinema in *The Truman Show* concerns the principles that govern the action of the television show and it also works on dueling levels. In the middle of the film, we learn that Christof can feed lines to his actors, and we learn earlier that everyone in Seahaven is wired in to a radio signal through which they receive directions. These are hard details to recall at mundane moments, but doing so ruptures the movie in a fascinating way. When we are first introduced into Truman, he is speaking directly into the camera lodged behind his two-way bathroom mirror, giving a fanciful monologue as a dying man trying to scale a difficult mountain. He rambles on, with no sign of stopping, when Meryl calls to him, reminding him of his lateness and the monologue ends. In another scene, Truman has stolen away to the basement to spend some time with some very personal memorabilia that he believes is

only known to him. At one point, Meryl interrupts his reminiscing, and ends up making a plug for a brand of lawnmowers. In both instances, there is little evidence that anything was specifically orchestrated, but it is safe to assume that in a world that is entirely controlled by a literal man in the sky, nothing is left to chance.

In a conventional, nonmetacinematic film, Meryl's intrusion on such a private moment would serve to heighten the drama in the scene for fear that Meryl would discover Truman's true longings. But because there is a clear reason in the internal fiction for her appearance – to titillate the television audience – this moment is dramatic in both the internal fiction and the film itself. By having Meryl interrupt Truman, Weir and Niccol have indulged in a classic move to intensify Truman's desire to keep something secret, and they have also called attention to the structured nature of the world, as Meryl was undoubtedly sent to the basement by Christof.

Weir and Niccol use this shortcut to filmic conventions multiple times. Early in the film, Meryl uses her feminine wiles to distract Truman from his recurring desire to see the world (and thereby leave the Seahaven studio). After she invites Truman up to bed, Weir cuts to a pair of security guards watching the show, where the one who seems to know the show better comments, "You never see anything anyway though, it's just – turn the camera and play music and, you know, the wind blows in and the curtains move, and you don't see anything." Not only have Weir and Niccol explained how the television show handles the more intimate moments that would surely conflict with the censors, they have avoided depicting sex in their own film and literally kept it PG.

This a superb wink at the audience, as they double up on functionality of the moment, and they have also gone so far as to prove their own point: art cannot be life. They cannot show Truman and Meryl fornicating, and if they did, it would certainly be simulated. Art can only go so far as to imitate, and perhaps echo it in certain respects. *The Truman Show* the film cannot depict an accurate existence anymore than *The Truman Show* the television show can.

“WHAT HAPPENS IN THE END? – OH. IN THE END, SHE DIES.” – TRADITIONAL/LIFE REFLECTS ART IN *THE RED SHOES*

The Red Shoes is *The Truman Show*’s traditional counterpart, but stands opposite the film in regards to the life/art relationship. The 1948 collaboration between Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (*The Archers*) is among the duo’s most revered, due in no small part to the film’s metacinematic prowess. *Shoes* tells the story of a perfect storm of a three-person creative team that brings Hans Christian Anderson’s eponymous fairy tale to life in the form of a ballet. Dancer Victoria Page (Moirá Shearer), composer Julian Craster (Marius Goring), and artistic director Boris Lermontov (Anton Walbrook) come together in a quintessentially filmically fantastical fashion – Craster and Page are both essentially non-professionals at this point in the story, but Lermontov sees promise in both of them and uses his power as the preeminent impresario of the ballet world to employ them both.

Before Lermontov meets either of his future partners, he actually refuses to see Page dance at a party after his latest ballet. Page’s shamelessly promotional aunt has arranged for her to dance privately for Lermontov, but he declines with disgust. He

claims ballet is his religion, and that one would not “really care to see one’s religion practiced in an atmosphere such as” the one they inhabit. This is our first real exposure to Lermontov and he has already started making the Archers’ argument for art as an intricate part of life that is worth more than one might normally assume, as Victoria’s aunt does, calling ballet “the poetry of motion.” Moments later, Lermontov encounters Page at the open bar where, clearly stricken by her elegance, begins conversing with her and calls the “dancing exhibition” he escaped a “horror.” Page reveals herself as “that horror” and an embarrassed Lermontov asks her why she wants to dance. “Why do you want to live?” she replies. Lermontov thinks for a moment, and offers his answer: “I don’t know exactly why, but I must.” Page agrees: “That’s my answer too.” With this conversation, the Archers have cemented their position on the relationship of life and art – the two are, in essence, one and the same. To true artists, artistic expression *is* life. As the film – and its ballet – will show us, Victoria Page exemplifies this to the utmost degree, as her life will literally depend on art. The two cannot be torn asunder.

It is not until forty minutes into the film that a ballet of “The Red Shoes” is first mentioned. Lermontov pitches the story to Craster in hopes that he will rewrite an existing but unpublished score for the ballet. The fairy tale is about “a young girl who is devoured with an ambition to attend a dance in a pair of Red Shoes.” Her character arc takes her from being “happy” at the dance, “tired” at the end of the night, and then totally controlled by the shoes’ will and she dies; “The Red Shoes dance on.” This is the basic outline of precisely what happens to Victoria Page in the film. When she is awarded the lead role in the ballet, she is ecstatic and, for a while, things go well: she dances lead for

Lermontov in numerous productions, receives great acclaim, and falls in love with Craster. But Lermontov grows jealous and ends up firing Craster from the company, and Page follows her love. In their first extended scene after leaving the company, Craster and Page both lay awake in their beds, restless, but clearly exhausted. As soon as Julian steals away to tinker at the piano, Victoria rises and goes to her drawer of ballet shoes, longing to dance again. (There is a pair of red shoes, but she does not touch them, symbolic of the fact that she cannot legally dance *The Red Shoes* outside of Lermontov's company.) Eventually, her itch must be scratched, and she strikes a deal to dance *The Red Shoes* for Lermontov, unbeknownst to Craster. *The Red Shoes* seems to exert the same power over Page that the Red Shoes exert over the Girl in the ballet.

The similarities between the characters of the film and the characters of the ballet do not end with Victoria and her starring role. The Girl is one of three major parts in *The Red Shoes*, along with a lover (the Boy) and the eerie Shoemaker who gives the Girl the Red Shoes and seems to have total control over them and, in effect, the Girl. The parallels are clear: Lermontov's need to completely manage Page makes him the Shoemaker. He repeatedly tells her that he could "make a great dancer" of Page as if he would literally create her. When she and Craster leave the company, Lermontov uses their contracts to prevent them from being able to stage *The Red Shoes* elsewhere. In the corresponding moment of the ballet, the Shoemaker is actually briefly replaced by Lermontov in the moment when the Girl realizes that she is helplessly trapped under the spell of the Shoes.

In this same moment, Craster also replaces the Shoemaker. At this point in the film's story, Craster and Page are barely on the brink of falling in love and have been

repeatedly clashing about the ballet and the music's level of importance in it. This frames both Craster and Lermontov as figures in Page's life who seek to exert control over her in one sense or another, but Craster's relationship is softened shortly thereafter when he briefly appears as the Boy, indicating his tender affection for her. These subjective moments further develop the Archers' vision of life as art. For Victoria, dance is an art that is so much a part of her life, that her life becomes a part of her dance. Even before we start seeing the substitutions that indicate Page's state of mind, cinema's power to make the impossible seem possible intrudes upon the mechanics of the ballet. The most striking instance is the donning of the Red Shoes. The Shoemaker places the pointe shoes perpendicular to the ground, the film cuts, and he lets go of them. They magically remain upright, and in another action that is cut up, the Girl jumps into them and the shoes immediately lace up and she begins dancing. There is no feasible way to achieve this practically, which is why The Archers resorted to quick editing, reverse motion, and the (slightly visible) use of strings that allow the shoes' ties to seemingly take care of themselves.

Cinema's influence on the ballet is everywhere, as the rapid changes between and sheer size of the ballet's sets could not work on the stage that we initially see. Several instances of superimposed images, such as the Girl dancing in the shoes before she has them on, also bring a highly fanciful tone to an already romantic vision of a ballet based on a fairy tale. The Archers use the fact that the ballet is *supposed* to look clean, planned, and scripted to fill it with moments of slow motion, spaces impossibly related to one another made apparently fluid, and dreamy passages. Metacinematically speaking, the

Archers have doubled up on function, as Weir and Niccol did with the explanation of censored intimacy in *The Truman Show*. In designing a ballet that could never be an actual ballet, the Archers could have opened themselves up to criticisms of realism. Aside from the fact that the ballet can be interpreted as partially Page's dream, the film has done so much to tie the objective reality to art that the art piece within the film can hardly be expected to stay within the boundaries of anything close to realism.

The Archers are such devotees to the script that they even slyly incorporate its notions into the film outside the ballet. Setting aside the parallels that we will investigate momentarily, there are two important instances in the film that deal with destiny. On a late night carriage ride with Craster, Page declares unprompted that she has "decided [to] believe in destiny after all." The news is met with basic indifference to both lovers. Scenes later, Lermontov catches wind of a vacation that will bring Page to Cannes for holiday, where Lermontov is putting together his next ballet. He surprises her at the train station, and enters her carriage, declaring, "We seem to be destined to meet at railway stations." Not only does this foreshadow Page's eventual death by train, but it also makes clear that Lermontov believes in destiny as she does. The Archers have placed their characters in a scripted world all of their own. The governing power of destiny implies that the characters cannot help where they end up, what they do, or even how they feel. In this respect, life imitates art: life is just as fabricated, structured, and economic as art.

This theory is especially powerful in *The Red Shoes*, as the ballet implies that the Red Shoes, in concert with the Shoemaker, rid the Girl of her ability to do anything but dance. Indeed, Victoria Page seems to lose control of herself, agreeing to dance *The Red*

Shoes, violating her boycott against Lermontov with now-husband Craster. Of course, Craster discovers this, and confronts her in her dressing room, minutes before the overture is to begin. Our three leads have it out, the men battling over who gets Page, and Page fighting simply to think and vocalize. It is a scene too long to discuss at length here, but there are a handful of worthy moments that speak to the metacinematic quality of the film.

Lermontov tells Page that she has left Craster – although she protests – saying that “no one can have two lives, and [her] life is dancing,” recalling their first interaction where she declared dancing was equivalent to life for her. Her desire to live a real life with Craster is in conflict with her desire to live through dance with Lermontov, again personifying the metacinematic tension between fiction and reality. When she declares her love for Craster, he challenges her: “But you love that more,” referring to the ballet. She screams that she does not know, having lost all power to reason beyond the fact that she must dance. Craster leaves her to dance, never to see her again, and Lermontov immediately tries to comfort her as best a manipulative, inhumane impresario can: “Life is so unimportant...and from now onwards you will dance like nobody ever before!” One final time, the Archers’ dialogue gives credence to dance being life.

But Page is too torn between fiction and reality to even process this. As a crew member escorts her to the stage, she is shaken and not functioning properly. Page can barely walk and her eyes are wide and bleary. For the majority of the next sequence, the Archers keep the camera trained on her feet that bear the Red Shoes. (As a side note, it is important to point out that the Girl does not wear the Red Shoes at the top of the show.

One must see this as an artistic decision on the part of The Archers to marry the ballet to the film in defiance of realist logic.) Page backs up with a look of terror on her face as her Red Shoes lead her jerky steps. At a frenetic pace, she descends a spiral staircase and goes to the balcony, falling over and landing in front of a moving train.



Figure 7: The Boy removes the Red Shoes from the dead Girl's feet.

Craster is present for this, running to her, although he is too late; helpless to save her just as the Boy in *The Red Shoes* is powerless against the powers of the Shoes. In a moment that directly recalls the ballet, Craster removes the Red Shoes, and Page breathes her last. The relative positioning of the actors is identical to the Girl's death in *The Red Shoes*; her costume is dirtied and ragged just like the dress Page changes into for the final scene of the ballet; Craster even removes Page's shoes in the same manner and order as

the Boy does for the Girl. And in a final masterstroke, the Archers decided to have Lermontov's company go on with the evening's show anyway. Just as Lermontov told Craster when he was summarizing the ballet, "the Red Shoes dance on." In this final case, it is the title ballet itself that dances on, putting a strong punctuation onto the end of their argument: life imitates art to the utmost degree. By fully mirroring the reality of the film's characters in the fiction the ballet in which they are all so heavily involved, the Archers have married art to life and fiction to reality.



Figure 8: Craster removes Page's shoes in the same manner after her death.

"IT'S ALL JUST LIES AND IMITATION!" – MODERNIST/ART REFLECTS LIFE IN *PERSONA*

A pillar of art cinema, Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966) is filled with ambiguity of all kinds and is bound to at least temporarily confuse any viewer who has not seen the

film multiple times. Although there is no featured fiction in the film in the same way that *The Truman Show* contains *The Truman Show* or *The Red Shoes* contains *The Red Shoes*, there is an explicit awareness of film itself. This abstract version of internal fiction pushes the boundaries of what can be considered as qualifying for this second category of metacinema, but *Persona*'s overt references to and inclusions of film and filmmaking are ultimately what allow for its inclusion here. The film opens with footage of a projector sputtering to life and ends with the projector shutting down. There are other key instances of metacinematic awareness, and those will be covered later.

First, I believe it is important to wrestle a little with Siska's description of a modernist piece of metacinema. He assigns "lived" problems to traditional metacinema, meaning that these films struggle with "how to make a movie, how to overcome the obstacles that threaten its successful completion," and so forth (287). Of course, we know this extends beyond films specifically, but the idea is the same: How does Truman escape this television show world and exert his right to real life? How does Lermontov produce his ballet and how does Victoria Page reckon her conflicting desires between love and dance? These are problems that are concrete; they do not require any extreme metaphysical thought, as the solutions are often practical. Siska then assigns "raised" problems to his modernist metacinema, using the question "What does it mean to make a movie?" as an example (287). So while a traditional film in metacinema relates everything to its characters, a modernist example turns "in on itself to consider its nature and structure" (Siska 289). Using this logic, he classifies *8 1/2* (Fellini 1963) as modernist.

While I do not entirely disagree, I think Fellini's masterpiece demonstrates the wide range of possibilities that emerge within metacinema as is typical for most efforts of categorization. While Guido (Marcello Mastroianni) does struggle with certain existential difficulties while making his movie, he also struggles with production issues: reporters, costume designers, and personal relationships that suffer as a result of his artistic endeavors. These are all problems one would find in a traditional film, yet the relationships between the moments of fantasy and reality are much less clear than one would find in a film like *The Red Shoes*. Also, Siska seems to be very attached to a film including an internal film in a very ubiquitous way as evidenced by most of the modernist examples he lists – *David Holzman's Diary* (McBride 1967) and *The Man Who Left His Will on Film* (Ôshima 1970) to name a couple. And while he includes films with less obvious presences of film such as *Hour of the Wolf* (Bergman 1968), there seems to be a slight bias towards films about specific films. I believe this to be limiting of the aforementioned range of possibilities, and that films like *Persona* have a place in this category, too. It is not necessary for a character to draw attention to the fictional film or story's presence within the film so long as there is a clear reference to actual storytelling within the film itself. With this thought firmly in mind, we can properly consider all the metacinematic complexities that *Persona* has to offer.

Persona tells the story of Elisabet Vogler (Liv Ullman), an actress who has suffered a type of breakdown, leaving her (perhaps by choice) mute. She is accompanied by a nurse named Alma (Bibi Andersson) to a seaside getaway for some rest and relaxation. Elisabet's vocation as an actress is not an immediate qualifier for this film as

metacinematic, although the film's handling of it is. Elisabet's initial breakdown happened while she was onstage, where "she fell silent and looked around in surprise." She was silent for a full minute. Elisabet later explained to her company that "she had got the urge to laugh." She follows through on this urge when Alma plays a radio melodrama for her in the hospital. The scene is serious and emotional, but Elisabet cannot help her giggles. This plays directly against a scene that follows not long after, wherein Elisabet is seen watching a news program on television. She cannot tear her eyes away from footage of a Vietnamese Buddhist monk burning himself in self-immolation. Clearly horrified, Elisabet is shocked by the immediacy and raw quality of the incident; she is practically incapacitated.

Elisabet is declared "healthy both mentally and physically," so there is nothing for an audience to suspect that needs to be cured to eradicate these extreme and disparate reactions. Elisabet is clearly becoming disillusioned with the falsity inherent in her profession. Anything false elicits laughter, but real life cuts her to the core. In this regard, Elisabet comes to represent fiction – or at least the power of it – in the metacinematic tension between fiction and reality. This is corroborated by Elisabet's doctor's assessment of her condition. She speaks of the "hopeless dream of being – not seeming, but being." She understands that – to Elisabet – "every inflection and every gesture [is] a lie, every smile a grimace." Elisabet's "lifelessness has become a fantastic part" and the doctor suggests she simply play the part "until it is played out" as she does on the stage and screen. Essentially, the doctor – in her expert medical opinion – has diagnosed Elisabet with a case of Fictionality, if you will. Elisabet is so immersed in a life of

pretend, lies, and art that she has shut down and become numb to all but the antidote.

This antidote is the reality that confronts her in the form of the burning monk and eventually in the relationship she forms with Alma.

To this end, Alma represents reality in the corresponding half of this personified tension. As a nurse, she contrasts Elisabet's fantastical celebrity; Alma is (at first) stable and rational, compared to Elisabet's muted and mercurial moods. In the scene that comes between Elisabet's laughing and shock, Alma speaks – basically to the camera – about life. At first she says that one could “do almost anything,” but as she outlines the future she has imagined for herself – marrying her fiancé (Karl-Henrik, an absent character), having children, and raising them – she calls it all “predestined. It's inside me,” she says. As in *The Red Shoes*, destiny implies a scripted fictional nature, or perhaps a fictitious understanding of the future that rationalizes its mystery. In absorbing this scene, it may seem that the character who is closest to reality has given up her free will and submitted to fictional logic, being willing to live the life that fits a certain stereotype or reflects a shallow and idyllic fiction. But as her relationship with Elisabet forms at the doctor's summer home, it is clear that she is just as complicated, contradictory, and complex as any real life human being. She reads philosophy to Elisabet, delves into the ins and outs of her relationship with Karl-Henrik, past lovers and their pain, and she gives an incredibly detailed account of a sexual foursome she had that resulted in an unwanted pregnancy and an abortion. She struggles to understand her past, saying, “It doesn't make any sense. None of it fits together. You feel guilty for little things.” Despite her early

predilection for a scripted life, Alma has chosen to live anything but that, expressing the cryptic and organic nature of reality.



Figure 9: Alma (foreground) bares her soul to Elisabet.

Still, her desire for a sort of destiny is evident in her desire relating to Elisabet. After pouring her heart out to Elisabet about her *ménage à quatre*, Alma confesses feeling a certain nearness to Elisabet. “I should be like you,” she says, essentially voicing her attraction to fiction and a fictional way of life. She makes reference to their somewhat similar appearance, but iterates that the real similarity she desires is “inside” and that – if she wanted to – Alma could become Elisabet, in a way, and vice versa. Bergman emphasizes this with his famous shots of overlapping, often perpendicular faces, as seen

in Figure 1. The women are seen in similar outfits, as Alma has abandoned her nurse's uniform. The height of their unification comes during the ensuing night Elisabet enters Alma's room, and the two end up facing the camera, stringing their arms, hair, heads, and necks around each other, disappearing into one another.

This union is brief, as Alma soon reads a letter from Elisabet to her husband that reveals Elisabet's true feelings towards Alma: somewhat belittling, slightly judgmental, but mostly objectifying. She has been "studying" Alma, presumably to serve as a basis for future characters. Alma is furious and feels betrayed. She leaves a shard from a broken glass on the ground, hoping that Elisabet injures herself with it, which she does. There is an unspoken understanding between the two women of Alma's intent to harm Elisabet, and Alma turns away from Elisabet. Immediately after that, the frames of the film become visible as the reel runs off the sprockets. The image wavers and flickers more intensely until it finally freezes and the last frame is burnt through.

We have witnessed the literal breakdown of film, but for what reason? Bergman has pitted his personified reality and fiction against one another. Initially, they got along and were looking as if they could become one. The matching outfits and overlapping faces indicated a kinship, but appearances are deceiving. When reading philosophy to Elisabet, Alma voices her optimism, but Elisabet agrees with the nihilist text. Judging from Elisabet's letter, Elisabet does not value human experience for what it is, but must evaluate it for fictional purposes as research material for a future role. The film's destruction is symbolic of the inability for life and art to harmoniously interact. After we return to the story, Bergman largely does away with the overlapping faces. In their first

scene together post-breakup, so to speak, Alma feigns peace for a few moments before asking Elisabet to speak to her – to engage in a proper relationship. She confesses to feeling hurt and used, and to having read the letter. In the midst of a heated brawl that evolves, Elisabet strikes Alma and Alma reaches for a pot of boiling water, when Elisabet speaks for the first time (about which Alma can be certain) and screams, “Don’t do it!” As it turns out, art can only preserve itself. As the representative of fiction, Elisabet has brought to life the phrase “Art for art’s sake” by reserving her only decisive action speaking up and engaging for when she is threatened.

Bergman seems to be adopting a self-deprecating view of art. Art is incapable of respecting the life it imitates; incapable of thinking of something beyond itself. *Persona* verifies this latter point, as the film has twice already turned in on itself, investigating the limits and nature of the art form. Elisabet cannot comprehend life – she is either repulsed or bewildered by it. One of the first definitive actions we see her take is ripping up a picture of her son. After the elongated fallout with Alma, she fixates on a photo she finds of a young, incredibly innocent boy in a Jewish ghetto from the onset of the Holocaust being evicted at gunpoint. Just like the burning monk on the news, Elisabet is incapable of processing such honest drama.

But how is this metacinematic? Without the presence of an explicitly internal fiction at the center of the story’s conflict, the presence of metacinema in general is difficult to locate. In order to properly assess *Persona*’s metacinematic quality, one must look at the above incident with the Holocaust photo as embodying the tension between fiction and reality that defines metacinema. Elisabet’s mindset is a fictional one: she sees

Alma – a real, average person – only as fodder for her next fictional adventure. So when she is confronted with extreme, raw truth in the form of the immolated monk or the terrified Holocaust victim, she is incapacitated. Alma's desires are very human: she longs to form a connection with Elisabet and she constantly approaches things with an emotional perspective. Her realistic characterization stands in direct opposition to Elisabet's unfeelingness. But in the same way that Elisabet's fictional mindset is thwarted by moments of extreme reality, Alma breaks down whenever she attempts to confront or connect with the cold Elisabet. In a nonmetacinematic film, this would simply be part of a challenging friendship that is the source of conflict. But in *Persona*, where Bergman has made such use of explicit references to film, the filmmaking process, and the treatment of fiction and reality in each other, the tension between Elisabet and Alma is elevated to metacinematic proportions, representing the tension between art and life.

As their relationship disintegrates, Alma and Elisabet are thrust into an odd situation. Elisabet's husband (Gunnar Björnstrand) arrives unannounced and mistakes Alma for Elisabet, trying to comfort her by telling her of how lost her son is without her. Alma tries to rectify the misunderstanding, but Elisabet physically encourages her to embrace it, bringing her hand to Mr. Vogler's face. It is a peculiar scene because Elisabet goes unnoticed by her husband, even though she is standing directly behind Alma. In this shot, her face is partially obscured by Alma's head, the first shot post-breakup that evokes the earlier shots of overlapping faces. This is less for our sake and more to indicate Mr. Vogler's skewed perception, as Elisabet and Alma are wearing different outfits: black and white, respectively. But this sequence shows us Alma as she tries out

Elisabet's persona for a while. She has sex with Mr. Vogler, while Elisabet seems to be in the room afterwards. (However, we cannot entirely trust that geography as he failed to notice Elisabet when she was staring him down in the scene directly previous.) In the dialogue we hear and assume is post-coitus, Alma plays along briefly until she begins to thrash about, screaming: "Leave me alone! I'm cold and rotten and indfferent! It's all just lies and imitation!"

Bergman has brought us to another metacinematic breaking point. Alma has been struggling to reconcile her relationship with Elisabet, asking forgiveness and equal participation, but to no avail. She did Elisabet's bidding and pretended to be her, presumably because Elisabet could not stand to play that part in that moment. So the next morning, Alma brings Elisabet face to face with the truth: she narrates her recent life back to her, telling of her pregnancy and how emotionally pained she was because of it. The truth hurts her, as one would expect. Elisabet tried multiple times to abort her son and when he was finally born, she is disgusted with him. Elisabet was so ill at ease with being a vessel for real life, that she sought to abandon it at every point along the road. Again, as with the monk and the Jewish child in the photo, Elisabet's fictional perspective is incapable of processing reality.

At the end of Alma's monologue about Elisabet's dark psyche, there is a quick use of a split screen and half of Alma's face is substituted for half of Elisabet's. Alma vehemently disputes this, as she can sense the collision of visage and persona that we just saw. She declares them sepearate beings, but the scene ends with the same half-and-half image, frozen. The score complements this with a jarring, dissonant chord, implying an

extreme terror that needs to be associated with such a thing. Elisabet and Alma – fiction and reality – cannot be joined harmoniously.

What is art if not a fiction that strives to reproduce life in a realistic, therapeutic manner? Any artist would love to be able to make art that is as real as life itself, but such a union cannot even be imagined, at least not in the mind of Ingmar Bergman. His fiction-encapsulated Elisabet is unable to embrace the liveliness of his emotional, responsive Alma, just as Alma cannot tolerate Elisabet's indifference to her real humanity. Even in cases of levity or relative shallowness, art is a disservice to life, despite appearances. When Alma was so comfortable with Elisabet, Elisabet was simply using and judging her for her own future artistic purposes. The ending puts an official stamp on things, as the two return to their lives: Alma dons her nurse's outfit again and leaves separate from Elisabet, who is seen back on the stage. Yet, before Alma leaves, she recalls the acme of their connection. When looking in a mirror and adjusting her hair, Bergman lays the image of Alma and Elisabet intertwined over Alma's face. There is clearly a yearning for the temporary harmony they seemed to express, but – as the rest of the film has shown – such a thing is impossible to sustain.

Bergman ends the film with shots of celluloid running its final frames through a projector and its arc lamp retracting and dimming, reminding us, yet again, that what was just seen was a work of fiction. For Bergman, as for Weir and Niccol, art can only imitate life, but to find true reality, one must step outside fiction. Elisabet, his surrogate for fiction, was incapable of absorbing life, or Alma, for anything but artistic purposes: she could not appreciate her on a human level. Bergman's film as a whole suggests the same

thing, as the film is only concerned with what film can and cannot do. Although he refrained from framing a specific fiction within *Persona*, by propping up characters to represent the opposing ideas of life and art, he created a metacinematic fever dream that seeks to establish an impossibility of life in art and, perhaps, an impossibility of anything besides art in art. The film he has just created was only capable of telling a fictional, creatively engineered story. To Bergman, it was devoid of any truth about the worlds outside of art: it could only deal in truth about the imperfect nature of art.

**“HE’S STILL PLAYING A ROLE, EVEN IF A SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT ONE.” –
MODERNIST/LIFE REFLECTS ART IN *CLOSE-UP***

The final film that rounds out this chapter staunchly supports the possibility of successfully blending art and life to the extent that they are presented as one and the same. Abbas Kiarostami’s *Close-Up* (1990) so kaleidoscopically mixes the true story of Hossain Sabzian’s illegal impersonation of Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf with reenactments and impugnable documentary footage of the very same story that it is almost unnecessary to dedicate the following pages to dissecting Kiarostami’s metacinematic tendencies. His thesis is obvious from the opening credits, which are not part of the first sequence, but come immediately after an extremely realistic introductory scene with unprofessional actors (Rosenbaum, Commentary). The credits reveal the entire billed cast to be playing themselves: already, we know that life and art have merged. People will be performing cultivated versions of themselves, drawing on real instances of their lives in order to create art.

Kiarostami’s methods are perhaps the most seemingly unsystematic of all the

ones on display in this chapter, but that seems to work best towards his goal of total integration of life and art. Should the lines of demarcation between truth and fiction be too clear or methodical, Kiarostami would undo his argument that the two are capable of being indistinguishable: that the messy unpredictability of life can be captured by art. Godfrey Cheshire describes it best in the Criterion Collection's booklet accompanying the DVD: "In effect, the film is not one in which documentary is blended with fiction but one in which an intricate fiction is composed of real-life materials" (4). Cheshire makes it known that it is not "just the reenactments but all the other scenes" that are in some way "scripted or otherwise contrived by Kiarostami" (3-4). According to Cheshire, every frame of *Close-Up* is exemplifying the tension between truth and fiction, working as pure metacinema.

Essentially, this can be seen as a reflection of Kiarostami's main character, Hossain Sabzian. In his first scene with dialogue, Sabzian is shown meeting with Kiarostami for the first time soon after he is taken into police custody. Of course, the nature of the film is such that this is not actually the case, but for purposes of the story being told – not the story as it is or was – this is their first interaction. As Kiarostami picks his brain, Sabzian tells him that "*The Cyclist* is a part of [him]," and that he wishes Mohsen Makhmalbaf to know this. Sabzian is immediately portrayed as a man who has internalized art, who sees his life as something that reflects art.

In the first reenacted flashback, we see his initial contact with a member of the Ahankhah family. On a bus, he is reading a published screenplay of *The Cyclist*, which is Mohsen Makhmalbaf's most recent film. Mrs. Ahankhah takes the seat next to him, and

they strike up a conversation about the screenplay. Unprompted and seemingly without forethought, Sabzian claims to have written it, saying that he is Makhmalbaf. This leads to a prolonged impersonation, during which Sabzian pretends to be Makhmalbaf expressing interest in shooting his next film at the Ahankhah's house and using them as actors in the film. He takes relatively little advantage of the Ahankhahs, although he does borrow a tidy sum of money (1,900 tomans that may or may not have been returned). Eventually, the family grows suspicious enough to have him arrested when "Makhmalbaf" is ignorant of an award he won at a film festival. Again, Sabzian himself embodies the metacinematic principles of the film, and doubly so. In reality, he was performing as Makhmalbaf. In *Close-Up*, he is performing as Sabzian performing as Makhmalbaf, as well as performing as Sabzian in the "documentary" scenes.

As Cheshire makes clear, even events that occurred after Kiarostami became aware of the story (by reading the article that he depicts being researched and printed) cannot be trusted as being fully truthful. The court scenes are some of the most curious in all of cinema: Kiarostami gains permission to film in the courtroom during the proceedings and sets up two cameras. One he makes sure to tell Sabzian – and the audience – that it is a close-up lens specifically for him and his reactions. The other will cover the judge and other angles. But Kiarostami's role is more involved than that of a simple observer, as he places sound operators in the middle of the room and even regularly interrupts proceedings to personally question Sabzian from behind the close-up lens. Even farther off-camera, "Kiarostami coaxed the judge into his verdict," which essentially allowed for Sabzian to have a dramatically lighter punishment after the judge

asked the Ahankhahs to forgive him, which they did somewhat reluctantly (Cheshire 6-7).

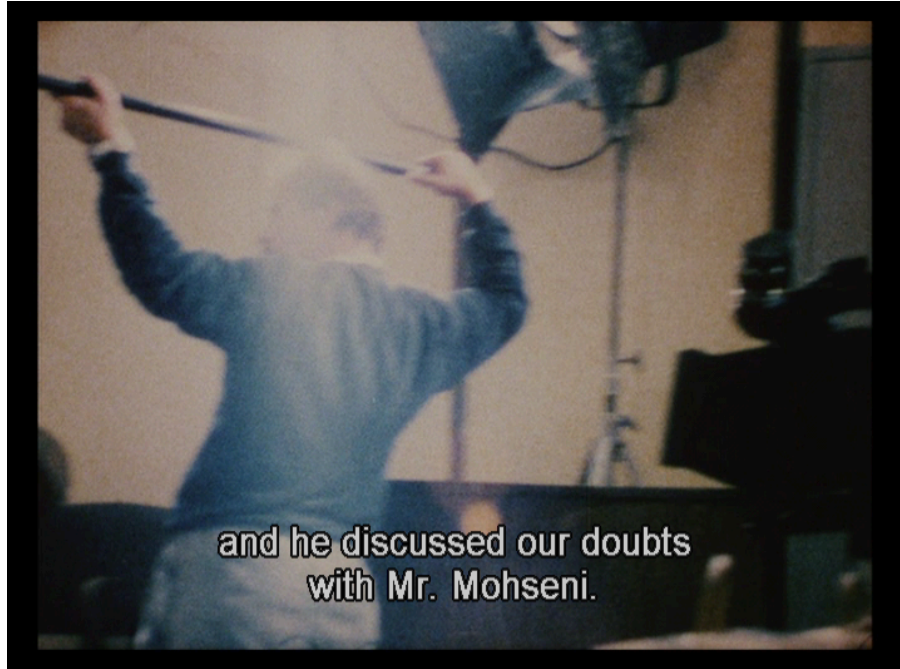


Figure 10: During a pan across the courtroom, we see a glimpse of the intricate setup. The crewmember and light seen here are between the bench and the gallery.

Kiarostami's strategies seem – at first – counter-intuitive. In a crucial scene near the end of the film, the real Mohsen Makhmalbaf is taking Sabzian to the Ahankhah's house on his motorbike (which recalls a potential film plot Sabzian spouted when he was acting as Makhmalbaf). The sound sputters out until it dies, and we are left with nothing of worth to be heard between these two men. Kiarostami and a fellow crew member can be heard off-camera when the problem first manifests itself saying the microphone that Makhmalbaf is wearing is fifteen years old and probably faulty. In actuality, most of the sound malfunctions "were created during postproduction to serve the final scene's emotional punch" (Cheshire 7). This is a perfect example of the somewhat unorthodox

ways that Kiarostami works to blend art and life. Instead of relying on his documentarian approach in the scene – shooting from a car across the street and following the men, constantly working to keep a distance – Kiarostami *created* a problem that could have feasibly presented itself during filming. It is a convincing ploy, as mistakes and imperfections go a long way to create the illusion of spontaneity or realism. But what is the use of layering a film with realistic “mistakes” if they are going to be known to the audience? True, a first-time viewer would not be able to tell if the sound errors are, in fact, errors, but research easily confirms that they are fabricated.

Why would Kiarostami go to such lengths to make the courtroom scenes look more authentic – the cameras are acknowledged, the scenes were shot on 16 mm film as opposed to 35 mm like the rest of the film (Cheshire 5), including the film slate at the opening of the first shot – if he was going to destroy the verisimilitude of the hearings by speaking during the case, question the defendant, when he has no legal power? Abbas Kiarostami clearly wanted to include an element of fiction. Because metacinema is so reflexive, there was no possible way for him to escape acknowledging the constructed nature of film itself. This awareness that Kiarostami embraced was supported by Sabzian and his aforementioned embodiment of metacinema. As a real person who was consciously executing a performance during his daily life, Sabzian was bringing fictional elements into real life and making life reflect art. *Close-Up* is a similar beast in that it tells a real story but every frame has a fabrication in it. It would have already been dishonest should it have been strictly executed as a documentary. Simply observing something changes its nature.

Kiarostami was not afraid of confronting this reality in his film. Towards the end of the court hearing, he asks Sabzian if he is “acting for the camera right now” and Sabzian responds: “I’m speaking of my suffering. I’m not acting. I’m speaking from the heart.” Perhaps Sabzian meant it, but it is rare – if possible – that anyone could act entirely natural under observation. By broaching this subject in his film, Kiarostami is purposefully calling attention to it. It is important to Kiarostami to have his film consistently treat art and life as equals and allies instead of diametrically opposed foes.

The employment of non-actors playing themselves in a film that tells their collective story unifies life and art. From this basis, Kiarostami works outward to intertwine both fiction and truth to create a truly unique work of art that celebrates realism through scripting. By conspicuously combining elements from both narrative and documentary forms of filmmaking, Kiarostami created a precisely calibrated atmosphere of metacinematic ambiguity that suggests that art is capable of capturing the *je ne sais quoi* aspect of life that defies a specific label because of the diverse nature that is the mosaic of real life. The film is so reflexive that it casts its view past the art of filmmaking and onto Sabzian and the questions his presence raises about representing the self and creating an individual reality.

This is the modernist element of Kiarostami’s metacinema at work. Instead of focusing on the challenges of making *Close-Up* and balancing its opposing but cooperative elements, Kiarostami focuses on Sabzian and uses his inner contradictions to mirror the film’s own composition. Instead of trying to separate art and life to show life’s reflection of art as *The Red Shoes* did, Kiarostami destroyed any boundaries to show the

same. Siska says that the “modernist project calls for the examination of roots and beginnings grounded in the self” (287). Sabzian is our collective self: a canvas for the relatable but overzealous cinephile that internalizes art to such an extent that he begins to live it in some ways. Cinema is in the self – art is in life.

CONCLUDING STORIES WITHIN STORIES

Wrapping up the most explicitly metacinematic chapter of this thesis, we can see two strong opposing forces between two sets of our four quadrants. *The Red Shoes* and *Close-Up* both feature lead characters (Victoria Page and Hossain Sabzian) who either explicitly or implicitly seem to be victims of an uncontrollable entity. Page is a slave to destiny and the Red Shoes; Sabzian remains unable to explain why he *initially* chose to impersonate Makhmalbaf and we have no reason to believe there was one other than an inexplicable impulse acted upon. These instances imply a scripted nature – a fictional power in life. Truman and Alma, on the other hand, fight fiercely to gain their sense of agency and control their own ends. This is the basic division between all films containing their own fictions: does life govern art or does art govern life? The other dividing line of these quadrants – the traditional/modernist axis – is simply a matter of what technique fits the story being told. But all four quadrants collectively use fiction within fiction to investigate the metacinematic tension between reality, truth, or life and art, fiction, or falsity.

Chapter Four: Performance and Dreams

In this final exploratory chapter, I will be tackling the metacinematic uses of performance and dreaming that occur in films without explicit reference to filmmaking, storytelling, or the art of fiction. As this is the most abstract treatment of metacinema, it is important to outline what – by my definition – can and cannot be considered metacinematic when it comes to a more liberal use of these elements.

As discussed in the introduction, Lionel Abel's concept of metatheatre flows outward from two central postulates: "(1) the world is a stage and (2) life is a dream" (Abel 105). These postulates will serve as the guidelines for this chapter. Of course, they apply to all forms of metacinema: the reflection of *The Red Shoes* (the ballet) in the real life of Victoria Page certainly argues in support of the view that the world is a stage where stories play out before our very eyes. But it is important to hold steadfast to these two specific ideas for the sake of this chapter, otherwise the inclusion of films that focus on performance and dreams outside of an explicit internal fiction as those featured in the previous chapter may seem arbitrary or unfounded. Not only are these postulates part of the origin of the first conception of meta in storytelling, but they fully encapsulate all the possibilities that come with seeing "the world [as] a projection of the human consciousness" (Abel 113). Films that integrate performance or dreams – or the suggestions thereof – into films in a wholly diegetic way qualify as metacinema for that very reason. This means that within the universe of each respective film, the dream or the performative element involved is treated as real – that is to say, treated as not a part of a

fictional construct, such as a part in a play within a film or a dream that a character has at night that has no consequence in his or her actual life.

This definition of what does and does not qualify as metacinematic uses of performance or dreaming is a deceptively difficult task. The films that will be discussed at length in this chapter will help to illustrate what does qualify, so let us take some time here to list what can be excluded. As I have mentioned previously, isolated incidents alone are not enough to permit an entire film to be considered metacinematic. For instance, the famous Salvador Dalí dream sequence featured in Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945) does not make the film metacinematic because it is strictly a dream that is treated as such and nothing more. Although it does relate to the plot and move the story forward, giving clues about the as-yet unsolved mysteries of Dr. Edwardes' (Gregory Peck) psyche, the dream is not treated as an equal element of objective reality. There is virtually no tension between the dream and the truth. In fact, because the dream helps to unlock the truth about Edwardes' past and mental troubles, the tension is nonexistent – there is no suggestion that the dream is anything besides a dream.

To give an example of an isolated moment of performance, I turn to *The Big Sleep* (Hawks 1946), in which Humphrey Bogart as the famed Philip Marlowe flips up the brim of his fedora, puts on a pair of glasses, and gives his hands and voice a particularly snooty set of affectations so as to pass himself off as a dedicated bookworm in a bookshop storefront while investigating the sprawling, uncontrollable web of mystery toward the beginning of the film. It is a comical scene, and Bogart plays it to perfection, stepping out of his hardboiled Bogey persona. This makes for a very memorable moment

onscreen, and the element of his Marlowe's performed character stands out all the more, but there is a clean divide between Marlowe and his picky book nerd. Marlowe dons the character only once in an effort to sniff out the legitimacy of the mysterious bookshop. Never does the character relate to Marlowe's own identity or anyone else's in the film. It is simply a tool he uses to continue solving the case, just like his smarts or masculine charm.

These examples are meant to stand in contrast to the following films of this chapter, where elements of performance and dreaming are essential to the entire film. Filmic storytelling usually puts forth an objective reality similar to that of its viewer – it operates by the same scientific, social, or legal customs. Even a large majority of fantasy and science-fiction films work the same way, but with a few select differences, such as the presence of aliens, magic, or an scientifically improbable technological advance or two. The films that demonstrate a tension between diegetic reality and performed life or between diegetic reality and dreamed life look to disrupt the easily understandable objective reality so many films create by elevating the element of performance or dreaming to equal treatment with objective reality. As we will see, these films give performance and dreaming ubiquitous presences in their stories in such a way that the very nature of reality is – yet again – brought into question.

The first two films of the chapter, *Vertigo* (Hitchcock 1958) and *Anna Karenina* (Wright 2012) use performative elements to demonstrate an altered sense of reality. In *Vertigo*, performance is imposed upon a character by others in explicit requests to take on another personage. By integrating this performance into the normal routine of everyday

life for the characters, *Vertigo* raises questions about the value of reality. *Anna Karenina* uses performance in a larger way, using a sprawling metaphor to show that all of Russian aristocracy is required to perform in order to function in society. Other films that utilize performance to a metacinematic degree include: *Being John Malkovich* (Jonze 1999), *Focus* (Ficarra, Requa 2015), *The Village* (Shyamalan 2004), *The Prestige* (Nolan 2006), *Mrs. Doubtfire* (Columbus 1993), and *Sleuth* (Mankiewicz 1972).

Ferris Bueller's Day Off rounds out the discussion of performance with its spirited direct address. By revealing his honest thoughts to the camera and putting up the front of a charming, carefree young man who actually has deep concerns and thoughts, Ferris (Matthew Broderick) indulges in a form of performative metacinema that inverts the normal understanding of performance in film. Other films with metacinematic treatments of direct address include: *The Wolf of Wall Street* (Scorsese 2013), *High Fidelity* (Frears 2000), *Annie Hall* (Allen 1977), *Richard III* (multiple films, including Oliver 1955 and Loncraine 1995), and *Wayne's World* (Sphreeris 1992).

Metacinematic dreaming in films is encapsulated by two films, the first of which is *Inception* (Nolan 2010). The film tells a story in a universe where dreams can be voluntarily lived and are treated as equal to reality. Because actions taken in dreams have consequence in the film's objective reality, *Inception's* treatment of dreaming is metacinematic. *Solaris* (Tarkovsky 1972) contrasts *Inception's* use of dreams in having the dreams penetrate the lives of real people, as opposed to real people penetrating dreams. *Solaris* uses personified dreams to question the nature and validity of real life. Other films that deal with dreaming in a metacinematic fashion include: *Fight Club*

(Fincher 1999), *The Matrix* films (Wachowskis 1999; 2003; 2003), *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Wiene 1920), and both versions of *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (McLeod 1947; Stiller 2013).

In previous categories and chapters, metacinema has explored whether or not cinema – or fiction in general – is capable of recreating or even accurately representing reality. Here, in this third category, the tangential relations of these films to filmmaking shift the discussion towards reality in general. Gone is the classically understood conception of metacinema that relies on explicit inclusion of filmmaking or storytelling. Here, the same concerns of fiction's presence in reality take amorphous shapes, resulting in ambiguity. Performance and dreams are the two solitary elements that can straddle fiction and reality if used deeply enough. Both elements can be used in such a way that the element becomes a part of reality. In real life, performances and dreams are taken to be nothing more than fiction: a character presented in a play or a story a sleeping brain randomly constructs. These things have no bearing on reality – they only express or are influenced by reality. But in certain films such as the ones featured in this chapter, these elements have the power to influence reality, as they are literally a part of a film's diegetic reality. Of course, their importance or place within each film will vary from story to story, but the point remains that these events that take place within these elements can be elevated to the level of truth.

So what makes this metacinematic? There is still no mention of filmmaking (although we will see that films in this category often lend themselves to filmic interpretations). Abel's postulates – in all their pithy glory – lay out the connection

succinctly. If a film presents the world as a stage, then the metacinematic link to the film is already present. Simply by treating reality as a fictional display, Abel believes that a story becomes meta. For instance, he declared *Hamlet* metatheatrical because it made Prince Hamlet to be a type of implicit playwright – creating false leads and guiding the characters around him in surreptitious ways, even performing a little himself – not because of the inclusion of the play within the play (Abel 50). If a film declares that life is a dream, the metacinematic link to the film is there as well. If life is a dream, then so can dreams be life, or at least a part of or equal to life. Abel declares that “[m]etatheatrical... replaced tragedy” in Calderón’s *Life is a Dream* because the power of dreaming eventually overtook the prophesized events of the play (72). In a sense, dreams became more powerful than the diegetic reality. It is this type of story-driving agency that Abel saw in performances and dreams that allow for such seemingly tangentially related elements to take center stage – as it were – in this category of metacinema to broaden the conversation to include the nature of reality outside of film.

“DID HE TRAIN YOU? DID HE REHEARSE YOU? DID HE TELL YOU EXACTLY WHAT TO DO, WHAT TO SAY?” – INDUCED PERFORMANCE IN *VERTIGO*

Alfred Hitchcock’s 1958 masterpiece, *Vertigo*, is very well-known for its heavy use of diegetic performance within film; however, it is not until nearly three-fourths of the way through the film that the audience discovers anything about performance having been a part of the film all along. Jimmy Stewart plays Scottie Ferguson, a newly retired police detective in San Francisco. He left the force due to his extreme vertigo, which made him a perfect target for Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore), an old college buddy hoping

to exploit this weakness to set him up as an infallible witness in the “suicide” of his wife. Elster hires Judy Barton (Kim Novak) to pretend to be his wife – Madeleine – and convince Scottie (while romancing him) that she is mentally unstable by claiming to be possessed by a dead San Francisco historical figure. Scottie’s vertigo renders him helpless when Judy as Madeleine runs up a tall tower to “kill herself” – what we really see is the real Madeleine’s already lifeless body falling past the window nearest Scottie where he has collapsed.

None of this is unveiled to the audience until Scottie happens upon Judy Barton and notices a strong resemblance, but he never suspects that she and the fake Madeleine he once knew are one and the same. After Scottie persists her and convinces her to accompany him to dinner that night, we are immediately given a flashback from Judy’s point of view that reveals her to be the false Madeleine and still genuinely in love with Scottie. For the remainder of the film, Scottie imposes his twisted desires on Judy, forcing Judy to dress and style herself as his Madeleine did. As this relationship plays out, Judy takes on her second performance and the audience looks on as she slowly succumbs to Scottie’s delusions. Scottie finally puts all the pieces together when Judy slips up by wearing a necklace she had donned as Madeleine that had a specific connection to her alleged spiritual possessor. The film abruptly ends with Judy’s death at the same tower of a Spanish mission where Elster staged Madeleine’s death.

Both the performance and dreaming films will be divided based on the agency involved – whether the dreams or performances are in some way connected to the agency of a character or if they are simply woven into existence. In the case of *Vertigo*, Judy’s

constant performances are inflicted upon her because of the active choices made by Elster and Scottie. And to clarify, these performances make *Vertigo* metacinematic because they are fully integrated into the diegetic reality of the film. Hitchcock and his screenwriters Samuel Taylor and Alex Coppel wrote Judy's performances into her reality far beyond the level of involvement one would find in a metacinematic film involving an internal fiction. In *Vertigo*, Judy performs in lieu of living a normal life, whereas the performances Bérénice Bejo's character gives in *The Artist* (Hazanavicius 2011) are simply *a part* of her daily life, as she is an actress.

Judy's initial performance as Madeleine at Elster's behest is so bewitching to Scottie, that he becomes catatonic for a period of time after death, followed by a period of wandering when he seems to be thinking only of his Madeleine. Judy's Madeleine inserted herself into Scottie, so much so that when he encountered what he thought was simply a potential "Madeleine" doppelgänger, he was not concerned with how truthful it would be to have Judy dress up as someone he knew she was not: his assessment of reality was permanently and negatively altered. Judy's identity is shattered in the process of her second performance commissioned by Scottie. At one point, she asks him, "If I let you change me, will that do it? If I do what you tell me, will you love me?" He tells her this is the case and she concedes: "All right. All right then, I'll do it. I don't care anymore about me." Judy's personification of the tension between fiction and reality results in a temporary misplacement of her self until Scottie drags it out of her as he reveals his knowledge of the truth to her. But for the major duration of both of their relationships, the woman that Judy puts forth is a false creation that Scottie accepts as real.

It is this overlap of the false and the real that qualifies *Vertigo* as metacinema. Judy's performances are fictitious in the sense that Judy and Scottie are both aware of the fact that she would not be dressing or behaving in a certain way without Scottie's insistence. But because this character that Judy adopts is accepted in her day-to-day, *Vertigo* is thereby demonstrating a self-awareness of fiction. Judy literally lives a construct, but she and other characters (Elster and Scottie) value her performances in a very real sense. In *Vertigo*, performance is an inherently created, constructed, and composed display that is an intentional departure from reality. But because Scottie treats Judy's performances as reality – despite all the while knowing the truth about her second one – he has elevated the fiction as I described earlier. It may seem that such a thing is not at all metacinematic as it could simply be a plot device or a means to achieve mystery. But Hitchcock's treatment of Judy's performances works far beyond those means, establishing the film's muddled and untrustworthy view of reality.

The fact that the audience is not privy to Judy's first performance is key. All the way up until the flashback in Judy's mind's eye over ninety minutes into the film, we are accepting her as Madeleine, a possessed woman, just as Scottie is. This way, our concept of the diegetic reality was false without us being fully aware, despite any suspicions we may have had about a woman being possessed by a dead spirit or having possibly interpreted her alleged possession as a type of performance already. Not only does this encourage an audience to provide Scottie with a modicum of sympathy as he slowly tears Judy down in the final thirty minutes of the film, but keeps the thematic focus of the film on the ever-meta concern of the true nature of reality. If, as she indicates, Judy is truly

willing to sacrifice her identity to be the vision of Madeleine that Scottie wants her to become, is there any less validity to that than to the image Judy was putting forth as herself prior to reconnecting with Scottie? Although being Madeleine-ish again takes a toll on her, Judy makes it clear that she wants Scottie to love her regardless. To Judy, Scottie loving the newer Madeleine is the same as Scottie loving her.



Figure 11: Judy as Elster's Madeleine.



Figure 12: Judy as Scottie's Madeleine after a painstaking transition.

When Scottie figures out the whole truth of the matter, he descends into his most despicable state, and drives Judy out to the Spanish mission under false pretenses, aiming to relive her “death” together. It is unclear whether or not he actually intends to bring the reenactment full circle by throwing her off the tower just as it is clear whether or not he is done with romancing Judy. As she protests his cruelty and continues to beg for his love, Scottie rebuffs her, saying he “loved her so,” but that it is “too late” because “there’s no bringing her back.” Regardless, he kisses Judy immediately after saying this, still torn apart. For Scottie, knowing that there is no such thing as the Madeleine he loved is devastating, and the substitute will not do. Curiously enough, the substitute is essentially the real thing, as Judy *was* the Madeleine he loved. But to know that the original was only ever an imitation seems to kill Scottie’s buzz, and he rejects Judy and her Madeleine all at once.

This would suggest that fiction is nothing without a reality to contextualize it: because Scottie realizes that his obsession with “Madeleine” was not with Madeleine at all, recreating a new Madeleine – although she would be cut from the same cloth as the original false Madeleine – is unfulfilling for him. There was no *true* basis for the Madeleine he loved, or at least not one he ever knew. All of a sudden, Scottie comes to see that his love never had a true entity capable of receiving it. The world was a stage, and he thought it was something more. His reality was entirely fabricated by performers (Judy as Madeleine and Judy as Scottie’s version of Madeleine) and a director/writer (Elster, paying Judy and telling her what to do). This caused Scottie to become a director himself, fashioning Judy in ways that suited his wants. He created a stage around his life

based on what he thought was real, but the illusion crumbled without a sturdy foundation of reality.

**“YOU MAY, BY INDISCRETION, GIVE THE WORLD OCCASION TO TALK ABOUT YOU.” –
PRESCRIBED PERFORMANCE IN *ANNA KARENINA*.**

Vertigo’s inclusion of performance, while metacinematic, does not explicitly recall any obvious relations to performance in a more classical sense. *Anna Karenina* (Wright 2012), on the other hand, turns this approach on its head. Not only is a specific performance never demanded of any one character as Scottie demands of Judy, but also the expectation of performance is far more ubiquitous and expressed in the film in a highly symbolic manner.

The opening credits of the film feature the sounds of an audience arriving in a theatre until the sounds of an orchestra warming up quiets the invisible people and the image fades in on an old, ornate theatre with the curtain down. To be more specific, there is no curtain, but a backdrop painted as a curtain that is frozen to look partially open, revealing another curtain behind it. When the drop is lifted and the superimposed words “Imperial Russia – 1874” disappear, we see Stiva (Matthew Macfayden) splayed out on a salon chair, awaiting a shave. The barber arrives with a red apron that he flaunts like a *torero* attracting a bull. When he finally finishes prepping to shave Stiva, he does so with three slick and broad movements, impossibly giving Stiva a perfect shave.

Lest an audience be inclined to think that this highly theatrical opening is the beginning of some sort of bookend approach to the film or an isolated prologue, director Joe Wright and screenwriter Tom Stoppard (a writer we know to be very versed in

metafiction) make sure to continue the strain of action from this first scene with an appearance by one of Stiva's servants arriving to ask him about a giant decorative pear. From then on, it is clear that the film's action will simply – and, in diegetic terms, inexplicably – occur in a theatre. The next brief scene of Stiva's wife, Dolly (Kelly Macdonald) clearly shows an offstage area with fly rails and teaser curtains. When Dolly leaves the "house" with her kids to go see a relative, her exit from the stage shows an obviously fabricated backdrop of the Moscow skyline and snowflakes the size of quarters.

This may at first seem like a cheap ploy to give an old story a new feel on the surface without having to develop much deep thought, but it is quite the opposite. The theatrical setting of *Anna Karenina* works in many different ways. As I will show through numerous examples, the use of a literal stage is a giant metaphor, as well as an indicator of tension between performance and naturalism on a very specific level.

Wright and Stoppard do not limit themselves to just the actual stage; they use the entire space around it, including the house which sometimes has seats, balconies, catwalks, and even certain doors, all with a great deal of meaning. The first indication of this comes early on, shortly after Dolly exits with some of her children. While she is out, Stiva conducts what seems to be a continuing affair with a young tutor to one of his daughters. While we do not see any of the unfaithful action, we do see their hurried goodbye – Stiva slips into the frame from behind a pair of heavy steel doors nestled deeply in the backstage space and gives the tutor a brief wave. He hurries back into the main space, and makes an entrance onstage to find Dolly has discovered his infidelity.

The use of the space is very apt: the secret affair happens offstage, where secrets are best kept, but the truth of the matter is unearthed on stage for all the world to see. This event is important as it puts the film in motion, bringing Anna Karenina (Keira Knightley) to Moscow to settle Dolly and persuade her to take back Stiva, where she meets Count Vronsky (Aaron-Taylor Johnson), her passionate lover-to-be. It is also important because it begins to firmly set down what the rules and purposes of the stage are. Stoppard and Wright have taken Shakespeare's quote/Abel's postulate to heart and literally made the world a stage, or at least the world of aristocratic Russia in the late 1870s and early 1880s.

From this opening sequence, the film continues to embrace its use of performance. As Wright and Stoppard continue to establish the film's use of a theatre, we see sets rolled and flown in and out of the space that constitute literal scene changes. This practice becomes less common as the film goes on, but it is used to reinforce the film's metacinematic treatment of performance, just as the film is establishing its characters and their habits. Performance is also expressed in the choreography of the characters, some of which is literal. Its most obvious appearance is at a ball where all the characters are waltzing the same complicated, non-period waltz. The film rations out a dose of magical realism, freezing characters until Anna and Vronsky waltz by them, accentuating the growing passion between them by using it to literally animate their surroundings. In more subtle moments, characters move with ethereal beauty, like Anna does in her introductory scene. As her handmaidens glide around her, sliding rings on her fingers, ruffling her

dress, and guiding her blouse on, Anna's hands, chin, and arms remain elevated like a dancers so that she can read the letter from Stiva that begs her to come save his marriage.

While these highly artistic strokes of style with choreography do not directly relate to the metacinematic aspect of performance in the film, it is important to make note of them as it contributes to the continuing performative element, which prevents the theatrical setting from being seen as a simple gimmick or shallow set dressing, instead proving it to be a metacinematic framing device. The seriousness of this overarching visual metaphor is first driven home when Kostya (Domhnall Gleeson), a close friend and total antithesis of Stiva, leaves Moscow to return to his homestead in the country. From the moment we first encounter Kostya in Moscow during a visit he pays to Stiva at his offices, it is clear that he does not play the same part as everyone around him. While Stiva glides through his offices as his employees stamp papers in rhythm – standing and sitting in unison as Stiva passes – he changes coats in the aforementioned choreographed style with the help of two servants. When Kostya arrives, he takes no part in the theatrics, keeping his head down and walking at his own pace. After Kostya reveals to Stiva his intentions to propose marriage to Stiva's sister-in-law, Kitty (Alicia Vikander), Stiva declares that they must procure him “new boots, a coat, and a proper hat.” Kostya's non-performative tendencies are obvious to Stiva and everyone around him and Stiva feels the need to literally dress him up in order to play the part of a potential suitor for Kitty.

Kostya is rejected, as Kitty has her sights set on Vronsky, so he returns to his country estate. In a total embodiment of reality that reads like a bright light in a dark tunnel upon first viewing, Kostya exits the empty stage through the impressively large

stage doors in the back of the theatre, usually used for bringing in large set pieces. As they open, they reveal a large, very real, snowy countryside. After being confined to a theatre for the previous twenty-plus minutes, the immediate and drastic change in surroundings is more than noticeable. Kostya walks through the endless landscape and the screen is flooded with space. The contrast between the limiting and shadowy extents of the theatre and the vast, real locations of earth and sky bring the film's visual metaphor full circle, embodying the tension between the performative and the natural; the fictitious and the real.

In contrast to the staged setting of Moscow and St. Petersburg is the verisimilitude of the countryside, reemphasizing the metacinematic nature of the stage setting. Only in the major metropolitan areas of Imperial Russia are people subjected to performing – more accurately, to being displayed on the world's stage. In the rural areas of the country, one (notably Kostya) is free to live and behave as he sees fit. Although he is a wealthy landowner in charge of a large estate, he works the land along side his employees, who are of undoubtedly lower classes. One does not need to keep up with appearances in the country, whereas city life is concerned with virtually nothing else. The stage in the cities indicate a façade that inhabitants must don that requires them to dishonestly perform as part of their daily lives as Judy had to do for Gavin Elster and Scotty. Again, the boundary between fiction and truth is unclear when characters must adopt false personas in a very real setting. The fact that this performance is not required in the countryside where Kostya resides is essential, as it shows that there *is* an objective reality devoid of the confusion involving performance. With this fully formed

framework, *Anna Karenina* demonstrates a self-awareness by showing a diegetic reality that presents the world as a stage as created by a society that puts so much emphasis on appearance. After all, as Abel puts it, “[f]or metatheatre [and consequently metacinema], order is something continually improvised by men” (113). Wright and Stoppard have fashioned their film to express this arbitrary man-made order through the metacinematic conflict of fiction and reality – performance and naturalism – in the high society settings.

Nearly every scene set in a city that does not take place in a residence takes place at some high society function. In each of these scenes, the conflict comes from the public’s perception of one character who is not behaving as he or she “should” be: Anna is usually the subject. At different stages in the film, she attracts different types of attention. Early in the film at the ball where Anna and Vronsky dance together, they attract the stares of the entire party, especially Kitty, who has taken deep offense at Vronsky’s slight towards her by spending his entire night dancing with Anna. During the most heated throes of Anna and Vronsky’s affair, Anna attends a horse race with her husband, Karenin (Jude Law). Vronsky is competing and expected to fare well, but when his horse takes a nasty spill and throws him, Anna reacts violently, screaming his name and forcing Karenin to try to salvage her honor. He approaches her and softly makes his presence known, giving Anna the opportunity to pretend that the race was simply too dramatic for a woman of her sensitive nature and that she needs the comfort of her only lover, her husband. (It also helps that both Vronsky and Karenin’s first names are “Alexei,” so Anna could have easily pretended that her scream of “Alexei” was for her

husband's presence.) When Anna rebuffs him, she refuses to perform as she should and irrevocably reveals the true nature of her distress.

In the final major example of a society scene, Anna and Vronsky are now living a life together, essentially as pariahs amongst royalty. Anna attends a night at the theatre against her lover's sound advice, and feels firsthand the pain of being shunned in a society where performance is everything. After a nearby wife rebuffs her husband for lending Anna his program, the whole theatre's attention is turned to Anna. Joe Wright literally highlights this moment of display, framing Anna in a spotlight as the rest of the space becomes darker. This emphasizes *Anna Karenina's* separation from *Vertigo* in that the performative aspects of life is not a direct result of any one person's intentions (as with Scottie's for Judy), but are a result of some larger conspiracy. There is no singular authority in the metaphor involving the stage: no stage manager present or director visible, not even a stagehand controlling the spotlight. The necessity to perform in high society is simply a ubiquitous fact of life.

There are many more details that flesh out this extended metaphor: Kostya's brother – who is a drunk and total outcast but lives in Moscow – is found in the corners of the backstage, indicating his removal from and total unimportance in society; the catwalk functions as a sidewalk for all the characters, equalizing them for a moment, as it would for an actor making ready for an entrance or a stagehand setting a Fresnel in the confined and transitional space. The advantages of the stage are even used to complete certain smaller metaphors. When Kostya first speaks of Kitty, he says that “she is of the heavens” and he is “of the earth.” In their first encounter together in the main atrium of

the theatre, he enters on the ground floor to find her far above him on the balcony. In greeting him, she moves to the stage, where the curtains open to find her elegantly posed on a chaise longue in front of a backdrop covered in clouds and cherubs.

But there is no more conclusive or salient moment to the film than its final image. Anna has committed suicide, leaving her illegitimate child motherless and abandoned by Vronsky, the father. Karenin has followed through on an offer he once extended her and has taken in the child, giving her his still honorable last name and a secure future.

Karenin and his son are seen in the countryside, as the father reads and the boy searches for his half-sister. We see blue skies and large, green fields – neither with an end in sight.

But for the final image, Wright places the new family of three in a long shot, revealing the fact that the theatre and meadow are now intertwined. The tall grass grows on every level surface, but the structure of the stage and its house remain very much intact. This final impression, I believe, is purposefully ambiguous and lends itself to at least a handful of valid interpretations. Perhaps Wright and Stoppard are suggesting that the performative and the natural were never separate, although I would point to numerous depictions of Kostya's life in disagreement, as we often see him without any possible artificial interference. Perhaps they are suggesting that society became this way in the coming years, and that true natural behavior became lost as the infant child grew. I interpret that ending to be specific to Anna's legacy as represented in her bastard child – as the result of such a tumultuous and spoken-of affair, Karenin and his two dependents will forever be subject to the scrutiny of the world's stage wherever they may be.

However, the specifics of my interpretation are not as important as the understanding that

Wright and Stoppard use the final image of their film to indicate a certain loss of purity in the natural, which is essentially what Anna's journey represents. The presence of the performance will spoil nature, just as fiction will distort truth.



Figure 13: The final shot of *Anna Karenina*.

“ARE YOU SUGGESTING THAT I’M NOT WHO I SAY I AM?” – PERFORMANCE THROUGH DIRECT ADDRESS IN *FERRIS BUELLER’S DAY OFF*

The final type of performance is an especially overt type of metacinema comes in the form of direct address. In the introduction I excluded voiceover narration as metacinematic, even though it is addressing the audience with greater pretense than other types of less obvious forms of narration, like a montage of newspaper headlines or even text shown at the open of a film *à la Star Wars* (Lucas 1977). But when a character

repeatedly breaks the fourth wall and speaks directly to the camera with the awareness that there is an audience on the other side of it, metacinema is unavoidable.

Direct address appears in all kinds of films: Sheriff Bart uses it in *Blazing Saddles*, as it is a common joke in parodies; Martin Scorsese's *GoodFellas* (1990) uses it for the ending of the film, shifting the narration from the soundtrack to the diegesis and putting in right in the audience's face. In *Saddles*, the address functions as another metacinematic wink at the audience that underline's the film's irreverence. In *GoodFellas*, direct address is an isolated incident that prevents the whole film from being metacinematic, but it adds another dimension to Henry Hill's (Ray Liotta) self-loathing that rises to the surface at the end of the film.

In most other cases, direct address – when used regularly and purposefully throughout the course of a film – reveals the performative aspects of a character. Writer/Director John Hughes' beloved teen comedy *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986) is a prime example of this style of performance in film. The self-awareness in direct address is obvious, especially in a film like *Bueller* where Ferris (Matthew Broderick) speaks to the camera in almost half of his scenes. A film that employs direct address as frequently and distinctly as *Bueller* could not escape metacinema, although it is initially hard to classify. The characters remain the characters and there is no internal fiction. Plays and filmic adaptations of plays like *Richard III* that feature the heavy use of direct address are anything but parody or even parody of reaffirmation.

At first glance, labeling direct address as a type of performance may seem a bit of a stretch or overly nuanced, but upon further investigation, the association compliments

the narrational device. But perhaps the term “narrational” is a misnomer, or at least an incomplete label. In *Bueller*, Ferris uses his time with the camera to elaborate on a moment or fill us in on the background of a given situation. When he calls his best friend Cameron (Alan Ruck) to join him for his ninth sick day of the semester, Ferris explains to us how Cameron has been a sickly child and has a very cold emotional home life. While this does serve as narration, there is never an instant where Ferris treats his direct addresses as opportunities to tell us what is happening as it unfolds, as a voiceover narration might do.

As the film’s placement in this thesis suggests, the majority of Ferris’ direct addresses reveal a degree of performance inherent in the character. In fact, it is entirely evident from the first time he faces the lens. After successfully fooling his parents into believing him to be bedridden, Ferris shoots up in bed and turns his slack-jawed expression to us in awe: “They bought it.” Acutely aware of his unbelievable success, he continues to marvel that his parents “never doubted” what he claims to have been “one of the worst performances of [his] career.” The performance itself is entirely diegetic, as children convince their parents to let them stay home “sick” virtually every weekday. But the performance is contrasted in Ferris’ direct addresses, providing the counterpart of truth to his performative fiction.

Ferris Bueller is a master deceiver. As Dean of Students Edward Rooney (Jeffrey Jones), rightfully suspects, he has most certainly not been sick for all nine of his sick days. Somehow, he is set to graduate in a month, presumably as a result of his distinct charm. He accrues an impossible amount of goodwill throughout the course of the day in

the hallways of his high school as well as the offices of the local police precinct and on the side of the town's water tower. As Rooney's right-hand secretary, Grace (Edie McClurg), observes, "[t]he sportos, the motorheads, geeks, sluts, bloods, wastoids, dweebies, dickheads - they all adore him. They think he's a righteous dude." His celebrity status knows no bounds.

And just like a celebrity, Ferris performs to cultivate a certain public image. Before leaving his house in the morning, he indulges in a phone call to some impressionable freshmen. During the call, he uses his electronic keyboard multiple times that he has outfitted to produce various outlandish sounds of illness – sneezing, coughing, vomiting, and something that sounds like extremely sonorous bowel movements. He convinces them that he is basically dying while he is clearly at ease in his room. This kind of performance is analogous to the ubiquitous choreography of *Anna Karenina*: although both types of moments are not inherently metacinematic, their inclusion is important as they emphasize the element of performance that runs through the entire picture.

The true moments of metacinema arise, as previously stated, when Ferris turns to the camera. In most any film that involves direct address, an audience can count on those moments to be totally honest on the part of the character. Although Ferris is not as dishonest a character as Richard III, he still has plenty to reveal to the audience. In the scene immediately following the onset of Cameron's mental breakdown in response to the overuse of his father's car, Ferris has his longest continuous monologue with the camera. While his girlfriend, Sloane (Mia Sara), tends to Cameron, Ferris shares his true

feelings about the pair, admitting to being serious about his casual – seemingly sarcastic – proposal to Sloane earlier in the film and voicing deep concerns about Cameron’s future. Although he is shown to be tender and caring with Sloane at times, we never receive any indication from him that he engages in deep thinking that results in the kinds of conclusions he shares with us.



Figure 14: Ferris speaks to the camera, unbeknownst to Sloane and Cameron.

He even reserves certain moments of passion for his trusted audience. While trying to get seated at Chez Quis with Cameron and Sloane, Ferris pretends to be Abe Froman, “the sausage king of Chicago.” He butts heads with the *maître d'* (Jonathan Schmock) for quite a while, greatly frustrating him. When the *maître d'* of the restaurant leaves the foyer to take a call (that Ferris sneakily placed), Sloane and Cameron try to

persuade to “let it go” because he has “gone too far” and he is “going to get busted.” For a moment, it seems as though Ferris is going to deliver his retort to his companions, but he turns to the camera instead: “A) You can never go too far. B) If I’m going to get busted, it is *not* gonna be by a guy like *that*.” Broderick’s delivery of this line is exasperated and serious. When Ferris turns back to his friends, he is calm and asks Sloane to take the phone and ask for Abe Froman, continuing on with his next scheme.

If Hughes wanted the audience to know how Ferris felt about the situation, he did not need to have Ferris speak to camera: we would have heard the same message if it had been said to Sloane and Cameron. It might even make more sense for those lines to be directed at them, as the word choice directly corresponds to the cautioning phrases they chose. But Ferris’ knee-jerk response was too honest for him to deliver to even his closest of friends: it required an intimate moment where Ferris felt safe with his audience. Ironically enough, it is only with a literal audience when Ferris feels that he does not have to perform, while he is always behind a façade when he is with the people in his life. This mismatched relationship – pairing an audience with the natural and other characters with the performed – is what establishes *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*’s metacinematic quality.

Whenever Ferris speaks to us, he speaks the truth. He emphasizes this multiple times, reassuring us that it “wasn’t bullshit” when he told his parents that he had a test that day, or that he “was serious when [he] said [he] would marry” Sloane. In fact, those are the only two times that he expressly verifies something he said in an earlier scene. By doing so, Ferris establishes his trustworthiness with the audience, despite all the

scheming and lying he does with the other figures in his diegetic world. Acknowledging an audience is one thing, but dropping all pretense of performance with them is highly metacinematic. *Bueller* deftly allows Ferris to oscillate between naturalism with the film's spectators and performance with his onscreen companions, thereby embodying the metacinematic tension between fiction and truth that so deeply penetrates all of the films discussed here.

**“THE DREAM HAS BECOME THEIR REALITY. WHO ARE YOU TO SAY OTHERWISE, SON?”
– INDUCED DREAMING IN *INCEPTION***

As we move into our discussion of dreams, it is important, again, to establish some parameters. I have already covered the major ones that eliminate films that use dream sequences in the same fashion as *Spellbound* in which the dreams are treated solely as dreams. Another minor caveat that I must mention to avoid confusion is the use of flashbacks. Flashbacks are often framed in similar ways that dreams are, where the main narrative is temporarily deserted to fill in the audience on something that – in the moment of the reveal – only exists in the mind of a character. Such is the shared nature of memories and dreams in film. This is exemplified best in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Wiene 1920), the landmark German Expressionist silent film. The story of Francis' (Friedrich Feher) harrowing experience with Dr. Caligari (Werner Krauß) and his somnambulist Cesare (Conrad Veidt) is told in flashback for the entirety of the film, until it is revealed in a surprise ending that his memories of the events depicted are really the result of a delusion caused by a mental disorder: essentially, a dream in the sense that the events depicted never happened.

“Flashbacks” can even behave as part of metacinematic performance, as in the case of *The Usual Suspects* (Singer 1995). Verbal (Kevin Spacey) guides the audience (and his inquisitors) through the central crime of the film as if it were his memory of the events. In the twist ending, the audience learns that he has actually been performing as a reserved cripple of a criminal (as opposed to his true identity of the nefarious Keyser Söze) and essentially fabricated the film’s entire story. In these films and others like them, the flashback *is* metacinematic because it is intricately tied to the element of performance or dreaming. In the case of *The Usual Suspects*, the supposed flashback is really all a part of Keyser’s performance as Verbal, which creates a disparity between his real self and the fictitious events he swears occurred. And although flashbacks are structured in similar fashion to dreams, they are not inherently metacinematic because they often work simply as narrative devices used to increase or sustain suspense.

Christopher Nolan’s 2010 passion project *Inception* received a great deal of positive and negative attention for its layered narrative and unabashed in-film explanations of said narrative. Set in what seems to be the present day, writer-director Nolan’s film creates a universe in which the ability to live inside and to share constructed dreams spaces has not only been mastered but somewhat criminalized as well. Dom Cobb (Leonardi DiCaprio) leads a team of extractors, who routinely and illegally sell their services to corporations seeking to steal competitors’ ideas straight from their minds by sharing a dream with the individual in question and exploring the depths of his or her mind.

Inception's universe depicts a reality that can be and is directly tied to the dream world. In the opening heist sequence, we learn that pain experienced in the dream "is in the mind," and can be seriously detrimental to a dreamer, but that death in a dream simply results in the dreamer awakening. From the start, Nolan makes it clear that dreaming and real life are not mutually exclusive experiences and that actions in one realm can lead to consequences in another. One can receive training to militarize one's subconscious in order to protect their memories or secrets that pertain to real life but are accessible through dreams.

Throughout the film, blurring the lines between dreams and reality is shown to be a dangerous activity. In order for an individual to keep his or her perception of reality in check, it is necessary to fashion what the film calls a "totem." All the physical properties observable – aside from appearance – are to be known only to the possessor, otherwise someone could replicate a totem and manipulate that totem's behavior in a dream, convincing the possessor that he or she is in reality when it is really just a dream. For example, Dom's totem is a spinning top that only behaves normally – by eventually toppling – in reality, whereas it never stops spinning in a dream.

This totem actually once belonged to Dom's deceased wife, Mal (Marion Cotillard), before she committed suicide as a result of having lost her grip on reality. Mal locked her totem away "deep into the recess of her mind" because she so desperately wanted to believe that the dream world she and Dom had lived in for fifty (dream) years was real. Dom used inception, planting an idea in her mind that she accepted as having originated with her, to convince her that their dream world was, indeed, fabricated. They

killed themselves, awaking in the real world, but Dom's inception was too successful and Mal went on believing that she was still in a dream. Wanting to return to a reality she still felt eluded her, Mal committed suicide and proceeded to exist only in Dom's dreams as a detriment to his delicate work.

Mal is the cautionary tale for what happens if the tension between dreams and reality snaps and the difference becomes indistinguishable. The film continually dips in and out of dream spaces, but it is fairly dilligent in making clear which scenes are set in a dream and which take place in reality fairly quickly. The two exceptions to this clarity bookend the film. The film opens in an appropriately surreal fashion, with Dom waking up on the shore of a beach where he spies two children playing in the sand. We later understand these children to be a dreamt manifestation of his final memory of seeing his children; the *in media res* introduction to Dom is eventually revealed in conversation as a signifier for dreaming. As Dom explains to Ariadne (Ellen Page), the rookie dream architect he hires, "[y]ou always wind up right in the middle of what's going on" in a dream and "you never really remember the beginning of a dream." Long after Nolan establishes that Cobb is at work in a dream, he begins to proverbially zoom out on the film's depiction of dreaming, showing some of the technology and routine. We are exposed to the location of all the individuals who have actually entered the dream and we see them plugged into a strange hub of a machine with what appears to be a violent riot going on outside in an unnamed foreign country. Contrasted to the earlier designs of the posh mountain mansion, the setting registers as reality. But the target, Saito (Ken Watanabe), notices a flaw in the room's design and recognizes this realm as a dream as

well. This opening sequence establishes an ever-shifting, untrustworthy landscape for the viewer, but Nolan explains himself through the characters and stories quickly enough to encourage audience investment in the story.

The ending, however, is far more ambiguous and much speculation has been lent to interpreting the ending of the film. Saito persuades Cobb to cobble together a team for one last heist in exchange for Saito clearing Cobb's name in the United States as he is suspected of having killed Mal. In the real world, Cobb and company perform the inception on a ten-hour flight between Sydney and Los Angeles that allows them enough time to go into – what ends up being – four levels of dreams and firmly plant the idea. Seventy-seven minutes of screentime later, the operation is a success, everyone comes out alive, and the team deplanes. Dom makes it through customs, meaning that Saito's phone call prior to landing pulled the necessary strings. He arrives at his old home and spins his totem but sees his children in the yard and goes to them before watching to see if it topples or not. And it just so happens that the camera cuts away before that moment as well, but not without a couple of suggestive wiggles.

There are competing contextual clues that suggest opposite things for the final sequence. Dom is only shown wearing his wedding ring in dream sequences, and he does not wear the ring in the airport or his home after he lands. His father-in-law (Michael Caine) is also present in this sequence, and he is never seen in any of the film's dream scenes. When Dom sees his children for the first time, they are significantly older, whereas they have remained the same age every time they cropped up in dreams. On the other hand, we do not witness Dom exiting the dream spaces as we do the rest of his team: he is

in the fourth level, rescuing an incredibly aged Saito, who is moving to pick up a gun (presumably to kill them both so that they can exit the dreams) when Nolan cuts to Dom waking up on the plane. Dom appears bewildered, scanning the cabin, looking at his teammates in disbelief, almost as if he feels like he is waking up into a dream. When Dom notices his children, they are in the same exact position as all of his memories of them.



Figure 15: Cobb's children as he last saw them before the events of the film.



Figure 16: Cobb's children as he sees them at the end of the film, having possibly aged.

Of course, there are contradicting arguments that can be made for each one of the above citations. For example, one could write off Cobb's seeming disorientation upon waking up in the plane could simply be a result of such a drastic change in levels of consciousness, as he was emerging from four levels of dream space. This is further corroborated by Saito's near-equal displays of confused surprise as he makes the call that grants Cobb entry into the States. And one could argue that Cobb continues to act this way as the sequence goes on because the reality of the moment he has been dreaming of for so long feels so surreal to him, he can only rationalize it as if it *is* a actual dream.

Perhaps this argument would underscore what I believe to be Nolan's intention in ending the film in such a bold and ambiguous way. The final image of the wavering but still spinning totem is powerful in that it raises the ultimate metacinematic question: is what is being depicted real? As evidenced by the competing contextual clues listed prior, there are endless arguments to be made about Cobb's state of consciousness at the end of the film. Has he resigned himself to a life of dreams that he has chosen as his reality or is he actually finally firmly grounded in life as we understand it to be? By leaning into this ambiguity, Nolan highlights the tension between dreams and reality; between the fiction within the film and its relative truth. Not only does this play into the themes of the film that argue for agency to play *the* significant role in determining one's reality, but it plays to metacinema as well. When the lines between dreams and reality are so thin and obscured, who is to say what is real and what is not? As Christof says in *The Truman Show*, "We accept the reality of the world with which we're presented." If Dom wants to live in a dream world with imagined versions of his children and his life stateside, can

that simply become his reality? If he treats it as such, does that not make it so? The ambiguity may frustrate some, but its metacinematic rewards are endless. When a film that presents itself as conventionally as *Inception* seems to be and ends up posing serious questions about the nature of reality, metacinema's tendencies to reexamine the validity of real life as put forth in film become more valuable than the film itself. *Inception* masquerades as a mostly accessible psychological thriller while functioning as a stunning poster child for the possibilities of metacinematic function above the level of direct filmic reference and into the world of dreaming.

“WE DON’T NEED OTHER WORLDS. WE NEED A MIRROR.” – PRESCRIBED DREAMING IN *SOLARIS*

As is perhaps already abundantly clear in this final chapter, having left the concrete metacinema of fictions within fictions, ambiguity tends to reign supreme. Does Judy's death at the end of *Vertigo* indicate that Hitchcock believes in total separation of art and life? What does the final image of *Anna Karenina* tell us about the union of performance and naturalism? Where did Cobb choose to exist, and what does that mean for the supposedly objective nature of reality? It should then be no surprise that the final film of this chapter (and this thesis) is amongst the most ambiguous films of all time by one of the most ambiguous filmmakers. Andrei Tarkovsky dipped his feet into the science-fiction ocean for his 1972 work of metacinema entitled *Solaris*. I use the feet-dipping metaphor to A) connect it to the film's imagery of water and B) to make clear how unimportant it was to include science-fiction genre conventions for Tarkovsky in making *Solaris*.

Although the film is set in the future as evidenced by the video conferencing technology and the ability for easy and extended space travel, there are few embellishments in fashion, décor, or other updates common in science-fiction films. In adapting the novel of the same name by Stanisław Lem, Tarkovsky took a number of liberties. The book limits itself to space, while Tarkovsky decided to include a lengthy set of opening scenes on earth with our protagonist, Kris Kelvin (Donatas Banionis) (Commentary). This is relatively minor, but Tarkovsky also eschewed “Lem’s philosophically oriented” text for a more personal, religious, and ultimately existential film (Criterion Disc). In an excerpt from a documentary about Lem’s novel procured for the Criterion Collection’s release of the film, Lem himself specifically comments about their fundamentally opposed approaches to the story:

He sees space as something terrible and thinks that one has to cherish time spent on Earth, and that the whole issue of the Solaris Ocean is an annoyance, one could say. My take is that it is an interesting challenge confronting man, though it can, naturally, cause tragic conflicts and suffering.

Lem sees space and Solaris – the nebulous, autonomous ocean in the middle of space that creates mostly realistic projections of people from a person’s memory – as a curious beast and approaches it with cautious optimism, or at least settled ambivalence. Tarkovsky, on the other hand, shows a distinct love for nature and Mother Earth in the opening scenes of Kelvin at his father’s country home. Tarkovsky’s vision of space is cold and clinical, perhaps even more than one would expect space to be. From the moment Kelvin arrives,

the space station's crew is distant towards him and Kelvin struggles to discern what the state of progress is for the station's mission, which is his primary objective.

The outer space that Tarkovsky creates purposefully contrasts the inviting images of earth, and these locations correspond with dream space and reality, respectively. On the space station near the Solaris Ocean, the crew members are confronted with simulacra of persons that rest heavily on their individual consciousnesses. In Kelvin's case, he encounters a version of his deceased wife, Hari (Natalya Bondarchuk). As we learn throughout the course of the film, it has been some years since her suicide, and that event understandably provides Kelvin with an overwhelming amount of guilt. Nevertheless, he is quick to rid himself of the first apparition of Hari, expelling her into space via a spare space capsule. She reappears, and Kelvin goes on to accept her presence more easily as the film continues.

It may be difficult to accept Hari and the other phantasms as dreams because they are concrete and they are very much a minority in their setting of the objective reality of the rest of the film. But Hari's introduction immediately betrays her true chimerical nature. When Kelvin comes up empty-handed after trying to get answers out of his co-cosmonauts, he lays down for a nap. The camera tracks slowly up his body and rests in an upward-glancing close-up on his face. (This shot is also repeated before Hari's second introduction.) In the next moment, Hari appears, fully formed and clothed. This immediate cut makes clear the connection between his subconscious and Hari's identity. Solaris' autonomous energy plumbed the depths of Kelvin's mind and manifested Hari from his memories in the exact same way that dreams are formed.

Hari's stress-inducing presence on Solaris Station is the literal expression of the dream-reality tension that defines metacinema as we have seen in every previous film of this thesis. Even after Kelvin accepts Hari in her second appearance, conflict arises. Kelvin leaves Hari alone in a room, and she severely injures herself tearing down the thick metal door down in a desperate attempt to be with him. The lacerations along her upper body are deep and possibly life-threatening, but they disappear almost momentarily in true dreamlike fashion.

This is one of the many symptoms of Hari's nature as belonging to a true object of dreaming. The impetuosity that leads to her injuries as a result of the steel door comes from an incessant need Hari has to be with Kelvin at all times. Indeed, her existence seems to be predicated on his. While her identity is based on his memory and mental conception of her, Hari is also physically bound to him in a way. As Hari grows more comfortable on Solaris Station, some of her more inhuman qualities give way to an honest humanity that even exceeds Kelvin's. She is even seen leaving Kelvin towards the end of the film, asserting her independence. As Graham Petrie (co-author of *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky: A Visual Fugue*) remarks on the Criterion Collection commentary for the film, Hari "is the most fully human figure in the film, willing to sacrifice herself totally for the sake of the person she loves." In her waking dream that parallels her previous reality, Hari kills herself again. Her first attempt is not successful and she comes back to life moments later, but she eventually enlists the other crew members to destroy her through extreme scientific measures.

What can be more contentious in a metacinematic film than the suggestion that the only element of fiction (dreaming) is entirely more real than all true embodiments of mankind present? Kelvin's gut reaction to Hari's first appearance was to eliminate her immediately. What kind of cold human does it require to so automatically reject the image of a lost love? Hari's humanizing influence on Kelvin is clear in the final sequence of the film: after a fellow crew member suggests he return to Earth, Kelvin's thoughts are heard in voiceover as the camera floats over a familiar natural landscape. He wonders if Hari's return is at all again possible, and how he is to recover from such an emotionally trying ordeal. It is clear that his mission has taken a back seat to his reason for being on Solaris Station (and to the story of *Solaris*). Vida Johnson (Petrie's co-author and co-commentator) summarizes a final scene of the film thusly: "Tarkovsky cuts away to Hari's shawl to remind us that, as Kris had said earlier, she is perhaps more important to him and to us than all the scientific truth in the world." The questions that Hari's very existence drums up become more important than finding out how and why Solaris' ocean functions the way it does.

As a film about dreams, Hari's validity as an independent, real entity is called into question in many of the same ways as the dream spaces of *Inception*. As we can see by the end of the film, she is very capable of independent thought and action, although she is basically immortal and cannot do basic human things like eat and drink. But she clearly *exists*. She may not be human in the practical, day-to-day sense of the word, but Hari fully grasps the selflessness and sensitivity that comes with being human. The conversation can continue endlessly, but ambiguity is clearly Tarkovsky's goal. By

paralleling Hari's original suicide with her two attempts (one successful) on Solaris Station, Tarkovsky has literalized the competing presences of fiction and reality as we have seen repeated time and time again. But Tarkovsky's use of unresolved conversations – particularly between Kelvin and another crew member, Snaut (Jüri Järvet) – purposefully allow for a bevy of interpretations of the film and its message(s).

This unresolved tension between the dreams of Solaris and the natural realities of Earth are reinforced in the final scene. After the film suggests that Kelvin is returning to Earth following a conversation on the matter between him and Snaut, a close up of a lone, green plant on Solaris Station, and shots of Kelvin wandering around the same property of his father's from the film's opening, it turns out that Kelvin has chosen to live on Solaris. A throwaway line from an earlier scene that told us about islands forming on Solaris now becomes terribly important, as Solaris has possibly grown in strength, so much so that it can now recreate entire locations as well as people (Kelvin's father is in the house created on Solaris).



Figure 17: Kelvin's recreated house on an island in the midst of Solaris.

This ending is not ambiguous in regards to the event of Kelvin's decision itself, but as to *why* he has made such a decision. His voiceover narration tells us that he has little hope that Hari will return. The only possible motive offered is perhaps his desire to experience the unknown, as he suggests that his life on Earth would become boring and he would not "be able to give [him]self to them fully." One interpretation (that I favor) is that Kelvin was attracted to the ambiguity of Solaris' reproductions and the unknown factors involved and was not willing to pass up the chance to explore and learn – an incredibly human instinct. But regardless of the interpretation, the ambiguity common to this third category of metacinema is preserved. By keeping the interaction between the dreamt and the real all the way through the final frame, Tarkovsky drives home his many (mostly unanswerable) questions about what benefits fiction and reality can derive from one another, if any.

CONCLUDING PERFORMANCE AND DREAMS

One important shared quality in these final five films that stand in for many for films that fit the "life is a dream" and "all the world's a stage" postulates – aside from a general tone of ambiguity – is the latent comparisons that can be made to literal film and film production or other types of distinct fictions. In *Vertigo*, Scottie acts as the director to Judy's actor, telling her how to dress, look, behave, and be. Even Gavin Elster's monologue to Scottie that sets up his fake wife's fake possession is delivered on a raised platform in his office that evokes a stage presentation (Puschak, "Hitchcock"). The unique visual metaphor of *Anna Karenina* makes obvious comparisons to characters and actors. *Inception* features an entire surrogate production team – Cobb as director, Ariadne as

production designer, Eames (Tom Hardy) as actor, Saito as producer, etc... (Puschak, “*Prestige*”). In *Solaris*, there is a recurring set of references to *Don Quixote* that suggest a parallel between Quixote’s imagined foes and Kelvin’s dreamt love. Petrie even makes a brief but convincing connection between the similar levels of verisimilitude between *Solaris* and film: “The ocean does not always get things exactly right...[A]s on a film set, the ocean needs only to provide the appearance of reality.” Even *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* plays on obvious theatrical convention with Ferris’ constant mugging to the camera as a farce on stage may allow itself.

These parallels are important to mention because it can be easy to dismiss these metacinematic expressions through dreaming and performance because of the lack of explicit reference to cinema or even fiction as we were so used to seeing with parody and fictions within fictions. We must remember, as we consider the vast array of metacinema, that any serious dealings with a distorted or challenged reality via the extensive use of performance or dreams refer back to the very roots of meta – Lionel Abel’s metatheatrical postulates. Parallels as mentioned above could be found in a great number of films, to be sure, but they do not carry the same weight when found isolated in a film that does not investigate any split between or blurred lines of the objective truth and a constructed fiction.

I believe that the existence of these connections to cinema and its creation are symptomatic of the performative and dreaming elements in the films. The presence of such metacinema is what makes these moments readable as metacinematic, whereas in a film without metacinematic treatments of performance or dreaming, these moments

would either be interpreted very differently or simply not exist. For example, if *Vertigo* had no performative aspect, the staginess of Elster's monologue to Scottie could be read as a simple demonstration of power dynamic in which Elster is displaying dominance over Scottie by standing on a literal higher ground. *Inception*'s characters would not be comparable to creative roles in the filmmaking process if the film did not give a metacinematic treatment of dreaming because there would be no fiction for those characters to create analogous to the way filmmakers would create a film.

The analyses and discussions in this chapter have hopefully elucidated the possibilities for metacinema. Internal fictions, while arguably the most popular and easily recognizable type of metacinema, are not the limit to metacinema. Films can show the abstract side of metacinema by creating worlds that treat the generally fictitious elements of performance and dreams as equally diegetic as the world around them. These examples of metacinema have embodied Abel's postulates to such a degree that the mirror a film turns on itself shows less of the "stage" and the "dream" and more of the "world" and "life."

Chapter Five: Conclusion

“Conclusion” is perhaps not the best word to use to title this final section. With barely fifty years between the present and Lionel Abel’s first use of the word “metatheatre,” the study of meta qualities in storytelling is still in its infancy, although the practice has been around almost as long as storytelling itself. There is a good deal of catching up to do.

But first, let us review the work done here. Starting from Abel’s early work and its descendants (Gass, Siska, Christensen, Waugh), I established three categories for films that are metacinematic: Parody, Internal Fictions, and Performance and Dreaming. Each of these types of metacinema in some way investigates the nature of reality. In parodies and films with internal fictions, reality or truth is directly pitted against cinema’s attempt to recreate those things through art. Parodies usually focus on deconstructing genre conventions or archetypes, inevitably drawing on Aristotle’s six elements of drama as separate elements ripe for parody. Through parody, a film partially embraces its genre – or auteur on a more rare occasion – in order to poke holes in it from the inside. The self-awareness required of metacinema is implicit in this act, even though a film may not have a character speak to camera or directly quote another film in jest. By consciously employing filmic conventions, subverting them, and exposing their artifice through exaggeration and overemphasis, parodies make up the first category of metacinema. These properties are even extended to reaffirmation parodies as coined by Wes Gehring, films that more fully embrace their parodic targets. These films are harder to spot and use parody in more subtle manners, often through diegetically sensible humor and believably

extreme situations. Without fail, reaffirmation parodies end as their name implies, reaffirming the archetypes of its subject with an earnest ending.

Films with internal fictions put the mechanics of storytelling front and center by featuring the creation, performance, or reception of a fictional work as a main ingredient in the film's plot. The fiction can be another film, a play, a novel, a television show, a ballet, an opera, or any number of fictional outlets. As William Siska discovered, these films can be split into two subsections depending on how they involve their internal fiction: Traditional and Modernist. Traditional films deal with the fictions in a more head-on fashion, showing the practical struggles an artist faces as a creator or the concrete issues that arise from the creation of a fiction. Modernist films take a step closer to the third category, dealing less directly with the immediate matters of fiction and moving to more existential concerns, such as questioning the capability of film or fiction expressing or even being reality. To this end, films (of both subsets) will inevitably argue one of two positions: either art reflects life or life reflects art.

These specific arguments are rarely, if ever, found in the third category of metacinema, Performance and Dreaming. This category moves past any explicit reference to fiction as is so common in the second category to question the very nature of reality without a relation to film or fiction. Films with the performative element integrate characters who must perform as a part of their daily lives in a non-performative atmosphere – meaning one not typically associated with performance like a theatre company or sound stage – as a way to introduce an intrusive fiction into the diegetic reality of the film. The dialectic of fiction and reality is then embodied in a very personal,

oddly real sense. By bringing this tension out of a partially fictional context and placing it in a relative reality of a film, ambiguity takes over and films avoid answering whether art is more powerful than life as the films of the second category did so readily. Films that use dreaming metacinematically arrive at the same ambiguity by bringing dreaming into a realistic setting. These films grant dreams, dreamt figures, or dream-like states equal diegetic power as the relative reality of the film, thereby creating the definitive tension of fiction and truth. Again, the question becomes about what reality is and is not, or what it can and cannot be.

Films that employ extensive and regular use of direct address form an outlier for this final category. Direct address from one or more characters involves an element of performance, as a character who speaks directly to camera is often, if not always, being totally honest in a way that he or she is not with the characters that surround him or her. This inverts classic understandings of performance, as the character treats his or her fellow characters as an audience, while treating the film's audience as a safe haven for truth, dropping all pretenses and lacking performance. The most trustworthy source of reality in these films is ironically found in the moments that seem the most filmic: when a character speaks directly to an audience, acknowledging the presence of an audience and therefore the existence of the film – the fiction.

With these conclusions, what is the next step in understanding metacinema? What questions remain to be answered, or even to be asked? To begin, I mentioned in the introduction that this thesis would not cover the metacinematic quality of mockumentaries. These films obviously draw on parodic technique to lambast the format

in a loving way often to great comedic effect. But to investigate this subgenre of film would require writing about the metacinematic quality of all films that fall under documentary in some way, including documentaries themselves. Documentaries have a very evident self-awareness: subjects constantly talk directly to the camera or to the interviewer at its side, and this interviewer's voice is often heard at different points in different films, exposing the author as would have so pleased Lionel Abel. Is the fiction/truth tension reversed because documentaries are so much more tethered to bringing truth to the screen than narrative films? What does that mean for mockumentaries as films that reverse that reversal, using a format reserved for "true stories" to tell a completely fictional story?

I would be remiss to ignore films that use the documentary format in less common ways than mockumentaries in this discussion. A film like *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (Charles 2006) is certainly a mockumentary in that it uses the documentary format to tell a fictional story, but there are large elements of truth worthy of documentary in the film. The vast majority of people who appear on camera with Sacha Baron Cohen as the titular journalist signed release forms without knowing what the footage was going to be used for or the fact that Cohen was an actor playing Borat (Marchese, Paskin). With that in mind, it is clear that there is some elusive element of truth captured in the candid reactions of some of the subjects of the film, however candid one can be when consciously being recorded.

There is just as much to be discussed in a film such as *Death of a President* (Range 2006), a fictional film that uses the documentary format unlike other

mockumentaries, as it earnestly explores what the filmmaker sees as a possible future. Perhaps this serious use of documentary technique is to documentary as reaffirmation parody is to the parody's genre of origin. Needless to say, there is a great amount of work to be done in furthering our understanding of the metacinematic qualities of documentary and its descendants.

There is also a worthwhile discussion to be had about the metacinematic specifics of documentaries themselves. As I mentioned earlier, documentaries have a natural self-awareness, but there are some films that take this a step further. For example, *Stories We Tell* (Polley 2012) presents itself, at first, as a by the books documentary, adjoining talking head interviews with archival footage to tell the story of how the director, Sarah Polley, came to learn that she was likely the product of an extramarital affair. Her mother passed away some years ago, so the truth of the matter is brought to light via extensive interviews and contact with the man everyone suspects is her father. Eventually, it becomes clear that the "archival footage" from what appear to be home videos is entirely too convenient and the end of the film reveals that these were all staged recreations of moments that might never have been.

As the film's title implies, the film is very concerned with the nature of storytelling and the veracity of these stories. In short, she is on a search for truth through the fictionalized versions of truth passed down through her family. Compounded with her use of staged home videos, Polley's film is a metacinematic documentary in ways that most documentaries do not strive to be. How would this type of film be understood as metacinema? Surely, it has shared territory with *Close-Up*, the film that takes a mostly

fictional approach to a true story, but *Stories We Tell* presents itself as more of a straightforward documentary for the majority of its running time, whereas *Close-Up* starts out like a narrative film and works to integrate the two forms with more ambiguity. *Stories We Tell* cannot be understood simply by applying the same concepts from our study of narrative film or even *Close-Up* to its unique execution. Documentaries are also in need of their own metacinematic study and attention.

As with any early work on a subject, which I believe this to be, there is plenty of room for challenges, reorganizations, and additions to the thoughts presented. Perhaps there are films that are undoubtedly metacinematic, but they too clearly straddle more than one category. Or there are films that are plainly unclassifiable for reasons I am too blind to see and require the invention of another category. Even within the scope of this thesis' work, there will undoubtedly be reason to challenge. Perhaps another's conception of metacinema excludes most of the films that populate my third category on the grounds that they do not feature enough explicit reference to film or filmmaking. While I maintain that such films are metacinematic by virtue of their realistic inclusion of performance and dreaming in such a way that the true nature of reality is questioned by fiction, there is certainly an opposing case to be made.

All in all, this thesis is hopefully one of the first falling dominos in the study of metacinema. With such a dearth of work available on true metacinema, I welcome all the new contributions that have yet to be made. Meta's presence in the history of storytelling is testament enough to its attractiveness in human society. As beings capable of critical thought, it is only natural to put mirrors up wherever possible, to examine that which

examines and find truth in all that is. Metafiction is a human pastime that deserves more attention – at least attention in proportion to its presence in storytelling. And metacinema, as a product of the world’s most popular and accessible form of storytelling, requires more study if we are to continue to use it properly. Metacinema has a power beyond regular cinema in that it reaches beyond the scope of film to question more than a film’s own themes as presented through plot, and this must be respected. And what better way to pay respect to such power than to learn to understand such an awesome capability? And if, as Abel says of metatheatre, there is truly “no world except that created by human striving, human imagination,” then perhaps we can fashion metacinema to fit our highest purposes, whatever they may be or become (113).

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